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MEGATRAVELLER®

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TWILIGHT: 2000™

Avery's Raiders
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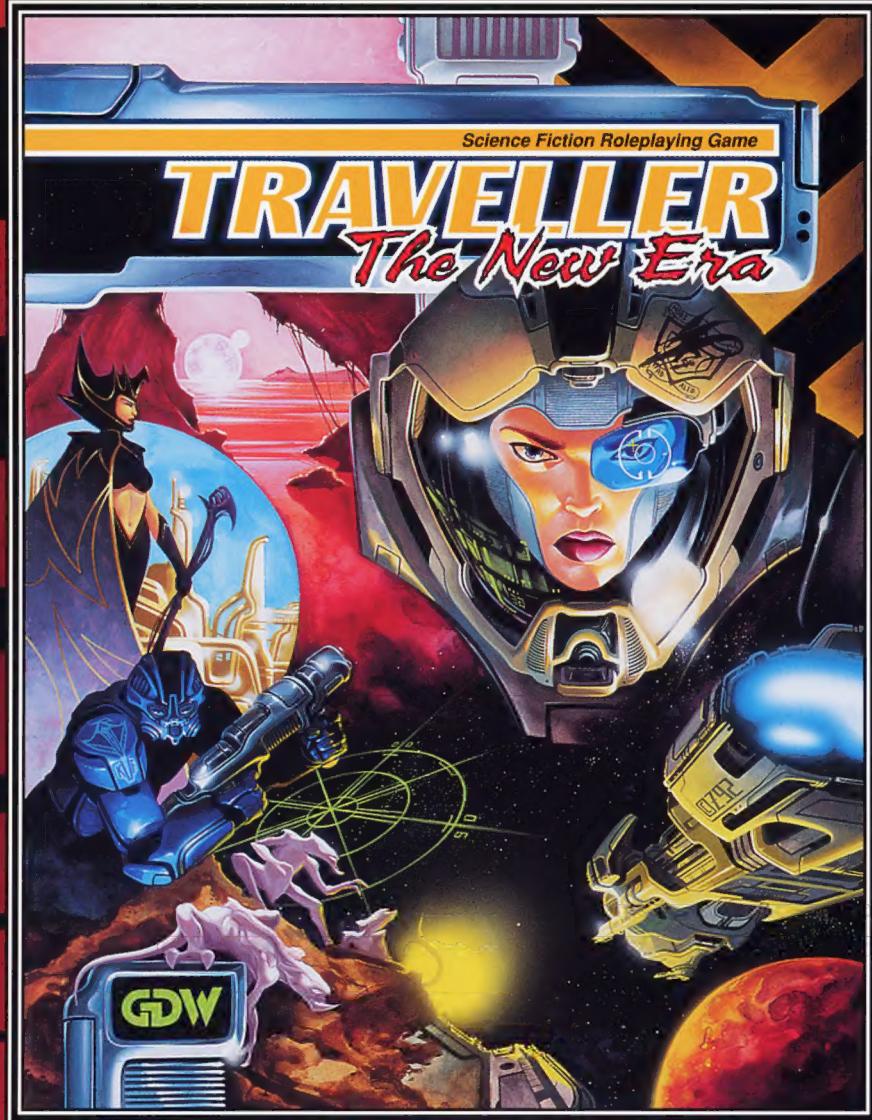
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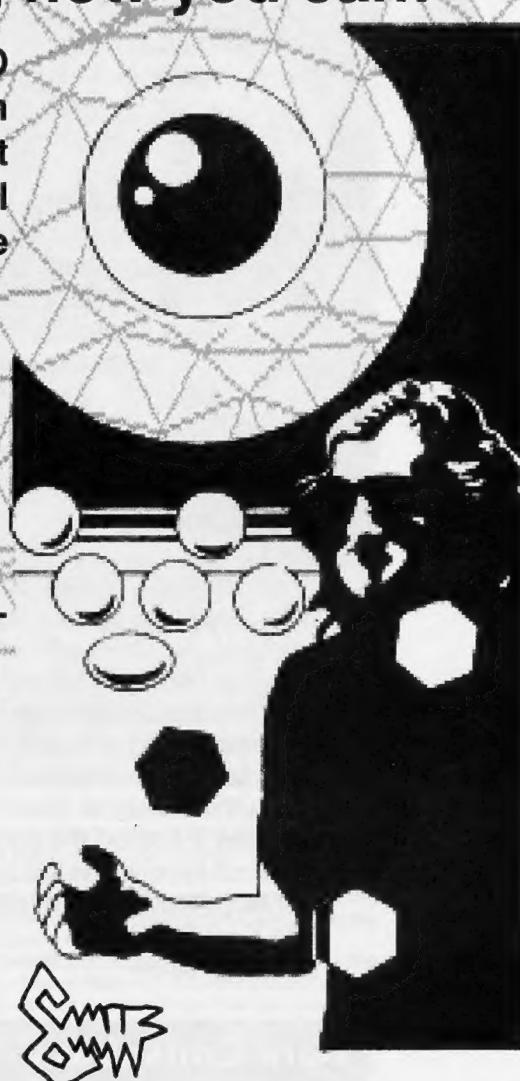
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All the Credit

Challenge

Issue 69

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ABOUT THE COVER
Ray Van Tilburg shows us MS Vigilante conducting flight ops off gas giant Salem (Daaliisa/2725 Diaspora) in 1130, shortly before being struck down by the AI Virus. Note Kestrel-type fighter painted in deceptive pirate markings.

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A WORD (OR TWO) ABOUT TRAVELLER: THE NEW ERA

by David Nilsen

Fasten your seatbelts, store your carry-on luggage and return your seats to the upright position—it's going to be quite a ride. We've got 16 years worth of **Traveller** stuff, plus quite a bit of new stuff, to make available to the public for **Traveller: The New Era**.

Things that we always wanted to do for earlier editions, we've got a chance to do now. RAFM is going to be doing a line of starship miniatures for us, to go with **Traveller Starship Combat**, as well as 25mm **Traveller** figures. We're working on computerized **Traveller** play aids, and more stuff that I can't really talk about yet.

One of the things that strikes me when I'm working on TNE is the answer to the question, "What is **Traveller** about?" Well, everything basically. You can fly to any planet, land on it, go to any point on its surface, and interact with what you find there—critters, plants, aliens, you name it. Can you go to a world with square-rigged sailing ships? Yup. A world where they have light-sail regattas? Yup. A world with flying cities? Yup. That takes a lot of space, doesn't it? You'd better believe it.

We've got alien races and critters that haven't seen the light of print since **Best of the Journal**, and are dying to make their reappearance. We've got robots the size of battlewagons (funny thing, too, it even looks like a battlewagon...). We've got emperors that won't stay dead. We've got so much neat stuff we want to bring out that we'll all be busy for a long, long time.

A lot of that stuff will be showing up in **Challenge**. Adventures. Essays on the new system. How science fact becomes science fiction roleplaying. Updates on who is doing what where in the New Era. Stay tuned to **Challenge** to stay on top of it all.

Did someone ask if we'd give **TNE** a lot of support material? Was Dulinor a dork? Strap in, boys.

Waiting for Traveller: TNE

Recently I have heard that you are planning a new edition of **Traveller** done in the universal rules format found in such games as **Dark Conspiracy**, **Cadillacs & Dinosaurs**, and **Twilight: 2000**. All I can say is great!!! I love the game, even though I've played quite a bit of RPGs I always wound up returning to **Traveller**. When is it planned for release? This is certainly going to be a hot item!

Placing it within your universal set of rules was an extremely good move since the game can cover any world from stone age to space age...allowing crossovers from any of your other games. At the same time, some referees I know eagerly await it as a way to boost a present campaign...if **Twilight: 2000** starts to bore the players, then they can send them racing through the shattered Imperium (heh, heh, keeps those boastful tough guys with big guns in line). Ever since it was simply a black box with someone's mayday on the front, it's been a great game...and this new twist will simply make things better!

One final note: Was there any clear planetary maps ever created for **Traveller**? The maps on the inside of the alien sourcebooks were some of the cleanest and clearest planetary diagrams found in any space RPG I played, and I wondered if you sold any blank planet sheets. If not you might want to consider including such a sheet in the new one (if it's not too late). Also, do you intend to create a whole new line of aliens supplements? Although (to be honest) I can't see why the present ones wouldn't work...and you folks are definitely gonna need a break after **Traveller: The New Era**. The aliens were one of your best touches, from Vargr to Kafer your aliens were obviously the result of some very intelligent thinking combined with the wonder of what such creatures could be like...not a lot of people think that way. Final note, the way you displayed weapons recently (picture and stats in a box as in **Dark Conspiracy** and **Infantry Weapons of the World**) is an eye-catching touch in any of your supplements. You might also try doing the same thing with the **Traveller** weapons, but don't kill yourselves with the overwork—this baby will sell whether it shows what a PGMP looks like or not!

Enough for now, have a good one.

Sincerely,
Greg Higgins

Thanks for the vote, Greg. A Blank World Map sheet came with the **MT Referee's Companion**, but we won't have space for one in the first **TNE**

book. There's an almost infinite amount of referee/player aid stuff that we look forward to putting out for **TNE** after the first book, aliens included. Initially, we won't do alien books as stand-alone encyclopedias. Instead, we plan to re-introduce the aliens in specific ways that are tied to the **New Era** storyline.

TNE Just What Doctor Ordered

I have played **Traveller** since 1980 (grade school) and have watched it evolve over the years. The original **Traveller** game was a vast bastion of enjoyment, and I distinctly recall several playing sessions during high school (especially "Twilight's Peak," so well done by a friend, and my own "home-grown" adventures and **Striker** battles). **MegaTraveller**, in my opinion, lacked some of the latitude of freedom in early **Traveller**, but the realism more than compensated. The only disasters, I believe, occurred with the swamp of errata and titanic vehicle construction rules. We actually lost some players because of this. However, news of **The New Era** is very encouraging. **AAB Proceedings 19** described some of the aspects of the new game, and I must admit that I am impressed. The switch to a **Twilight: 2000**-type system is, in my opinion, an excellent move. **TNE** sounds like just what the doctor ordered. As a 12-year veteran of **Traveller**, I congratulate you on a job well done and I look forward eagerly to the publication of **TNE**.

David Woodall
Morgantown, WV

P.S.—A **2300 AD** sourcebook, completely compatible with **TNE** sounds like an excellent idea—even non-**2300 AD** players like myself would buy a reasonably compatible sourcebook.

Challenge magazine welcomes your letters. The opinions presented do not necessarily reflect those of the magazine. **Challenge** reserves the right to edit letters. Write to **Challenge Letters**, Managing Editor, PO Box 1646, Bloomington, IL 61702-1646 USA.

CLARIFICATION

We previously announced that, pursuant to the wishes of Palladium Books, we would refrain from any future coverage of their products. We have now been informed by Palladium Books that this ban was intended only to apply to articles, not to reviews. Therefore, we will, from time to time, continue to publish reviews of Palladium products.

Proto Dimensions™



Warning:
Proto-Dimensional
walking can
have severe
side effects...
maybe.



Volume 1

The time machine has yet to be built in our world. However, in **Dark Conspiracy**, you can learn to walk through dimensions. The **Proto-Dimensional Compendium** provides you new dimensions to explore. Each new dimension is presented in adventure format, describing how player characters discover them, what they encounter within, and how they might get out again. Covered in this compendium are more than 12 dimensions to explore, as well as a multitude of information for the referee so that the dimensions can be used repeatedly within a **Dark Conspiracy** campaign.
GDW: 2109. \$12.

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I served in 'Nam as a supply officer. Came back and settled down in my old hometown. Took out a loan, set up shop and ended up with the most successful general market in the county.

I was too old for the Twilight War, but it affected me anyway. Looting, food riots, constant supply problems, security costs through the roof—it almost fell apart in the early years. Even now, it's not easy supplying an entire town with the necessities. Gives me the willies sometimes.

Still, things could be worse. Patentown's got an ace-in-the-hole that keeps us running, even turning the marauder problem into a plus.

Patentown, GA, September 2001

Northern Georgia in **Twilight: 2000** is a terrorized area, but numerous towns are organized cantonments. One of those cantonments is Patentown—a former piece of small town America serving blue collar factory workers and their families. The old industries have closed down but the physical locations of the plants are largely intact, so some of the machinery is used by the town council to keep the place running. This practice also provides jobs and generally gives armed, scared people something creative to do.

The population is estimated at 2200, roughly a 50% reduction since the strike

If the marauders steal things, fine.

on nearby Dobbins AFB and the subsequent chaos. Patentown's surrounding countryside is dangerous but not quite anarchistic. Use the Fortified Village map from **Twilight Encounters** or the boxed set of **Twilight: 2000** 2nd edition to represent Patentown. Building locations may be improvised to your taste.

Food supplies are a problem in Patentown, especially when coupled with a drought. Georgia suffers from a plague of marauders, and Milgov isn't

We'll just steal it back.

always around to help. There's a well armed militia of 400 men consisting of former soldiers, national guardsmen and survivalist civilians. Patentown's real avenging angels, however, are Avery's Raiders.

AVERY'S RAIDERS

Avery's Raiders are a group of 170 Elite Georgia National Guardsmen led by an ex-marine, John Lucas Avery. Avery founded the Raiders in response to the marauder problem and operates under an unusual premise: If the marauders steal things, fine. We'll just steal it back.

Avery's guard unit was destroyed in Europe, so he feels he has been unofficially discharged from



John Lucas Avery

Commanding officer, Avery's Raiders

Rank: 1st lieutenant

Rads: 10

Initiative: 4

Age: 33

Service Branch: US Marines, Force Recon

Skills:

STR: 4

Heavy Weapons: 1

Melee Combat: 2

Small Arms: 4

Thrown Weapon: 2

AGL: 5

Stealth: 1

Wheeled Vehicle: 3

CON: 7

Swimming: 3

Motorcycle: 2

CHA: 5

Leadership: 4

INT: 5

Observation: 3

EDU: 6

Computer: 2

Avery was a computer technician's son from Atlanta who became fascinated with military hardware and entered National Military Academy after high school. Avery entered as a marine, rising through the ranks in Force Recon. When the war broke out, his 225th Marine Expeditionary Unit, with Avery as its leader, was one of the first to cross the border when the Bundeswehr began to falter. The 225th landed near Murmansk in mid-1997 to cut off Soviet marines retreating eastward and quickly mopped up enemy units in its region.

For nearly a year, the 225th served with distinction in this area before a tactical nuclear strike coupled with a swift counterattack trampled the unit in late 1998. Avery was one of the survivors, but could not face the war any longer. He brought the remains of the 225th out of Europe in 1999 during the evacuation, and the unit disbanded on the return home. Avery founded the Raiders six months later.

the marines. But the rest of Raiders—although they stay with Avery and operate only out of Patentown—still consider themselves members of the guard. After all, they are still defending the interests of Georgia, which was their job to begin with. There was talk of incorporating the Raiders into the local national guard and making it a Milgov unit, but Avery would like to remain independent as long as possible.

Avery's unit is an Elite team comprised of the remains of numerous elements: Georgia National Guardsmen, Elite law enforcement agents, well-trained civilians and survivors of the 225th Marine Expeditionary Unit. All are armed with military issue weapons. The team travels in two M60 tanks, an M1, an M2 Bradley, two M113s and five fifteen-ton trucks. The trucks are mounted with M60 MGs and have improvised armored plates along the sides.

REFEREEING THE ADVENTURE

The PCs may wander into Patentown while marching through Georgia and be asked to join the local militia. Or they may be approached by Avery's Raiders, or be taken as marauders and attacked. (If the latter happens, Avery's Raiders do take prisoners, so the PCs will end up in Patentown anyway.) New PCs may already be members of the town militia.

Whatever the case, the PCs are in Patentown when a crisis arises—the food supply is running extremely low. Normally, overproduction and aggressive trading with other towns would cover the difference, but word comes early one morning that marauders have defeated the militia of Hillsboro, a small town Patentown regularly trades with, and stripped the town dry. Surviving refugees are telling horror stories. Hillsboro was the closest community to Patentown, and it's too late in the trading season to mount up another convoy. Besides, other towns' surplus stocks are dry, and everyone is preparing to settle into winter quarters.

Avery's Raiders intend to hunt down and destroy the marauders that attacked Hillsboro, secure the stolen goods, and redistribute them so Patentown and the survivors of Hillsboro all get a share. Because of their extensive military experience, the PCs are asked along for the trip. The Raiders especially need people proficient in Tracking, Scrounging and Observation, since their first stop will be Hillsboro.

MARCH

Getting to Hillsboro requires a 15-

mile march south down Interstate 225. It's a large, modern freeway, but the countryside is wild, and the roads aren't in the best of shape.

During the march, random encounters may be rolled at will to keep things interesting. When these rolls are made, there is a 40% greater chance the group encountered will be refugees flooding toward Patentown.

One mile outside the city, the PCs find a vehicle hidden in the overgrown foliage (Average: Observation) on the side of the road. The vehicle is a wrecked, eight-ton cargo truck. Debris is scattered all over the place, and it looks as though the contents were evacuated in a hurry. An Easy: Mechanic check will show that the engine's ball bearings are totally stripped, and the fuel system is badly damaged from lack of maintenance. The tires have been stripped as well. The truck is painted in faded US Army camouflage, but the old markings have been crudely painted over with obscene graffiti, gang names and a hand-drawn depiction of a human skull with a knife running through both eye sockets. This is the symbol of the Road Blight, the marauder gang that destroyed Hillsboro. Neither the PCs nor the Raiders will be familiar with this symbol (the gang is not local).

HILLSBORO

Hillsboro is another fortified village, maybe one-third the size of Patentown. The main wall has been shattered by explosions in five places, and columns of smoke can be seen from five miles away. In the center of the town, the PCs find lots of bodies, mostly dead militiamen dressed in guard uniforms. Many civilians lie with them, brutally slain. The center of the town shows signs of a massive firefight, and the majority of the buildings are smoldering husks. The outer rings of the town are more intact, although a number of buildings there have been looted.

Once the town has been thoroughly searched, Avery will order the bodies to be lined up and covered with tarps. He will also order the men to deal with the fires raging out of control, if there are any. The PCs are welcome to help and will be "volunteered" if they have the appropriate skills.

A handful of survivors are scattered around the ruins. These are civilians of varied gender and age. When the PCs find them (DIF: Observation), the survivors will be huddling in corners or behind barricaded doors. Getting them to come out, other than by using physical force, will require DIF: Persuasion rolls

Marauder Encampment



and lots of roleplaying. Failing that, measures such as breaking down doors will be needed since the survivors are quite shell shocked.

Providing the survivors with food and drinking alcohol is the first step toward getting them to talk. If the PCs have no such supplies, some must be acquired from the town stores, which may result in a scavenger hunt at the referee's discretion. The Raiders won't be of any real help here because they travel light.

Getting any real information out of the survivors requires an AVG: Persuasion or DIF: Interrogation roll. Using interrogative methods will yield little because the survivors will not respond to harsh questioning. If the PCs fail to get anywhere, Avery will take over. Eventually, the following tale will emerge:

The marauders hit around four in the morning, starting by firing five times at the town wall. All five shells hit, knocking huge entrance points in the wall. Their men flooded into the town using mass storming tactics, basically trampling anything that got in their way.

The shooting started when the militia assembled. Things got very confused then, and no one's sure just what happened. The gang leader was so incensed at meeting resistance that he ordered the whole town sacked and burned, but the sun was coming up and losses were on the high side, so

the gang members withdrew before they had time to destroy everything. They dragged away their casualties and disappeared.

There were roughly 300 marauders armed with a variety of weapons. The gang seemed to be on foot and wore a variety of clothes, although they all wore the same symbol of a human skull on their jackets.

Upon piecing together the survivors' stories, Avery will send a contingent of 25 men to escort the survivors to Patentown in two M113s. The rest of the Raiders will be ordered to saddle up, and the hunt will begin.

HUNT

How this part of the adventure goes is really up to the players and referee. The PCs and the Raiders will most likely succeed, but finding a trail depends on an initial DIF: Observation roll to notice old tread tracks leading off into the countryside. Actually following up on the tracks and seeing where they lead requires a DIF: Tracking roll. If the PCs can't accomplish this, some of the Raiders may help, at the referee's discretion.

Assuming the trail is followed, a 30-minute march brings the PCs through rough country and small roads. Random encounters are at the ref's discretion, but things should run smoothly.

When the 30 minutes are up, the PCs (or the Raiders) find another marker—shallow graves containing 10 dead marauders behind a ramshackle house in the middle of nowhere. Finding the graves requires an AVG: Observation roll. The dead marauders are all wearing Road Blight colors.

In the house, two gang members have been left behind. They're Veteran punks, one armed with a

where the Road Blight usually camps out—in an abandoned rock quarry a few miles from the house.

The marauders are composed of 225 men, mostly Veterans armed with a variety of pistols, rifles and submachine-guns. The gang leader and his 10 officers, all army deserters, are Elite NPCs. The gang does not have endless amounts of ammunition or access to heavy weapons, but all the personal hardware is quite modern. The gang rides in two five-ton cargo trucks, one 18-wheeler trailer, an M278 CEV with the winch removed, an M60, and an M577A CP with the M2HB and most of the electronics (which didn't work anyway due to EMP) removed. These have been replaced by a TOW II launcher with three missiles available. These vehicles are not in the best of shape, and all are covered in graffiti. The main guns on the two tanks still work, however, and there are a handful of shells for each.

ATTACK

Avery will wait until nightfall to attack. At 2245, the Raiders will move out toward the quarry, where the M60 will be topside with orders to guard the down ramp. The quarry is out in an open field, so sneaking up on it will be impossible. The M60 will spot the Raiders three minutes into their approach and open fire. It will take the Road Blight four minutes to fully assemble.

The Raiders must capture the abandoned warehouse without destroying it. Unless the PCs want to fight a long, bloody battle, the marauders might not be killed to the last man. When the battle begins to go badly for them, they will retreat, burning the warehouse behind them. How the PCs solve this problem is up to them and Avery.

CONCLUSION

If the warehouse was destroyed, then the supplies were ruined, but at least the Road Blight will

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TORG
INTRODUCTORY

OPERATION:

Major Brace Preheim is a soldier from the old school. He's old enough to remember the days when the US was an undisputed superpower of the world, and he doesn't like mercs. That's why it's such a surprise when he contacts the PCs. Though loath to do so, he has orders to hire a merc unit.

The PCs are to recon a suspected terrorist camp located in the African country of Gabon, in some proximity to Okandja. The PCs are to find the exact location of the camp, define its perimeters and deduce the number of terrorists. The military will send in special forces once they get the intelligence information. The PCs shouldn't have to fire a shot. Right.

Preheim is authorized to pay the PCs \$30,000 upon completion of the mission. The military will also provide some supplies (such as gear and ammo, but excluding weapons).

ENTRANCE AND DEPARTURE

The action in this adventure all takes place in the jungle, so no map is needed. The PCs will be dropped by parachute about five kilometers from Okandja. If they have any vehicles, the military will risk the landing and set down in a cargo helicopter. They will be retrieved by the same helicopter that brought them in. The pickup point is a small clearing by the Ivindo River, 200 kilometers northwest of Okandja. The mercs have exactly 36 hours to make it to the zone.

COMBAT

The terrorist camp is patrolled regularly, and frequent forays into the forest are known. One patrol, in particular, is set up to encounter the the PC unit.

The combat sequence could take place during any turn, depending on the course of action of the PCs. Remember that vehicles might not be an asset in the forest. The PCs will have 15 combat turns to finish the main patrol. After that, more patrols will enter the forest in search of the PCs. Once that happens, the PCs will be forced to make a run for it.

NPCS

Etienne Tronga: Tronga is a high-level member of this terrorist cadre and a native of Gabon. It was Tronga's idea to set up a camp in his disordered country. Tronga is totally ruthless and won't stop attacking the PCs until he is dead. Tronga is a Veteran NPC and is accompanied by five terrorists.

Skills: Foraging: 4, Leadership: 5, Melee Combat: 4, Observation: 4, Small Arms: 6 and Stealth: 5.

Weapons: M1933 Tokarev, G3 with four extra clips and four frag grenades.

Terrorists: The five terrorists are Experienced NPCs.

Skills: Armed Melee: 3, Observation: 2, Small Arms: 4 and Stealth: 3.

Weapons: M1933 Tokarev, G3 with four extra clips and four frag grenades.

AFTERMATH

Preheim grudgingly pays the PCs for successful completion of the mission. The PCs are free to keep any gear they confiscated, as Preheim wants the PCs out of his face as soon as possible. The military will take the PCs to their original location; after that, the PCs are on their own. If Tronga survived the combat, he and his terrorist accomplices may prove to be interesting future adversaries for the PC unit. Ω



By John T. Swann





Regent Brzk has been assassinated, throwing the League of Antares into chaos!

Passing of the Flame

By James Maliszewski

Regent Brzk of the League of Antares has been assassinated in a terrorist attack, throwing the League into chaos. The archducal station Cherise, home of Regent Brzk and most of the government of the League of Antares, was lost with all hands after an uncontrolled fusion reaction in the station's power plant. For additional details, see the current edition of Traveller News Service (page 31).

Since Brzk's renunciation of the Imperium in 1123 and his subsequent adoption of the Julian-style title of "regent," many humans in Antares felt that their leader's sympathies lay with the Vargr and the Julian Protectorate, not with the culture and traditions of the Third Imperium as he so often claimed. Now, rioting and civil unrest have destroyed order even within the Safe area of the League. Human and Vargr are set against one another as the government slowly collapses into anarchy. Despite the best efforts of many, the League of Antares will soon break up into a collection of fractured and squabbling worlds, thereby ending all for which Brzk has striven since the Rebellion.

This adventure takes place in 1129 in the weeks following the assassination of Regent Brzk and most of the League government. The PCs are agents of the Antarean intelligence agency Trasilon who have been summoned to the world of Mordred (Antares 1012 C110552-8)

in order to receive new orders bearing on Trasilon's perhaps final operation, Project Vesta.

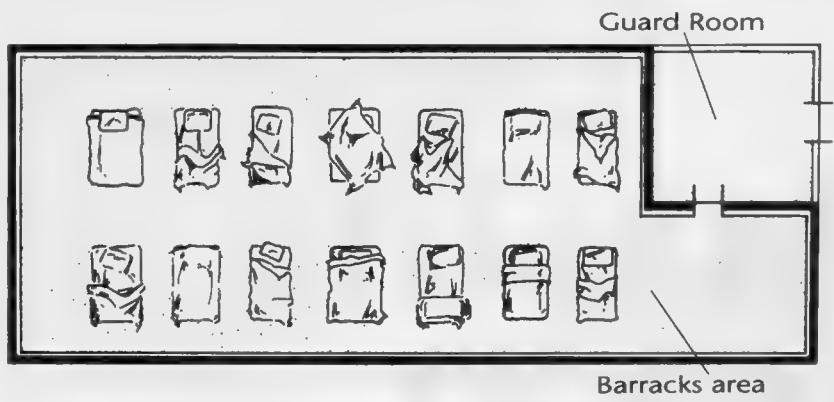
AT MORDRED

Mordred is an unimportant world in the Outlands of Antares sector. Trasilon chose it for this reason to be a meeting point for teams surviving the unrest of recent weeks. When the PCs arrive there, they are ushered into the office of Commander Zuekzarr Ghallraer, an old Vargr who heads up what remains of the once-great intelligence network.

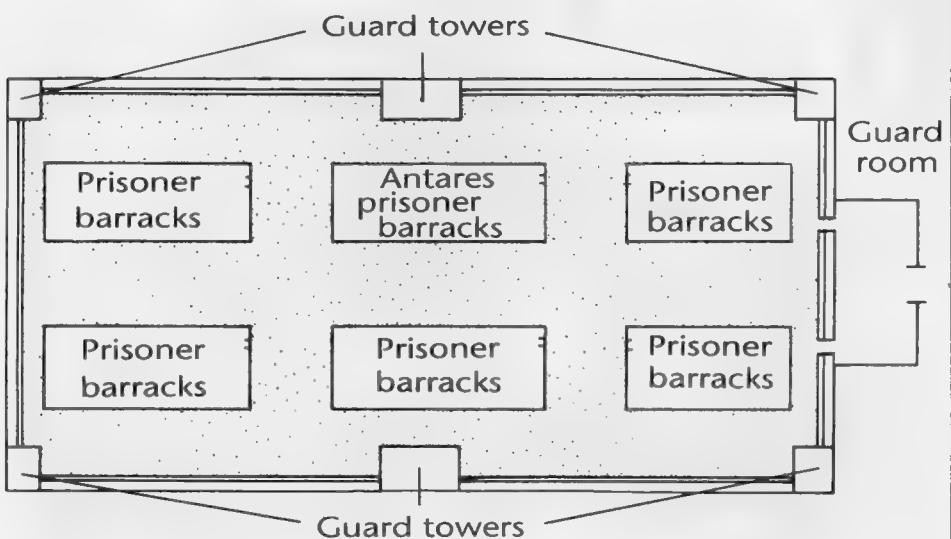
Commander Ghallraer explains that Trasilon is engaged in what may be its final operation as a cohesive organization, Project Vesta. Project Vesta is a plan to prevent some of Brzk's policies from dying with the regent himself. A small number of key League governmental and military officials are to be smuggled out of Antares, through the Outlands and Wilds, into nearby Lishun sector. There, in the friendly interstellar polity known as the Confederate Worlds of Ot Zell, these officials will set up an Antarean government-in-exile and bide their time until they can return to restore the League project which has the potential of salvaging at least something of Antares to be held in trust for the coming of a better time.

Ghallraer adds that multiple teams will be operating in the sector to rescue League officials stranded or held captive on various worlds. The PCs are to pilot a free trader (armed with weapons of the PCs' choice) to the world of Ryan

PRISONERS' QUARTERS



PRISON



(1014 Antares D868543-8), a member of the interstellar polity known as the Antares Ring Cluster (ARC) Confederation. The ARC was once part of the League but has since seceded. It now maintains a policy of xenophobia and hostility to the goals of the League. As such, Antarean officials trapped on ARC worlds have been taken prisoner and scheduled for execution. The PCs must free these officials, like Admiral Cyrus Djoulikian, in order to begin their mission.

After they have completed the res-

cue, the PCs must travel spinward to Ereshkigal (0716 Antares A300510-A). There, they will meet up with other officials they must transport to Lishun. The final leg of their mission consists of a treacherous journey through the Outlands and Wilds of the subsector until they reach Ambemshan (0216 Antares A445700-9), where a transport vessel awaits to take them all into Lishun and the Confederated World of Ot Zell.

Ryan

Ryan, like all ARC worlds, is rapidly

becoming a xenophobic and hostile world. Racism aimed at Vargr is at an all-time high, and most inhabitants blame what remains of the League government for their troubles since the onset of Hard Times. In many ways, Ryan is quite typical of the worlds of Antares since the death of Brzk and the general crackup of factional government. For these reasons, League officials were bound to be incarcerated as convenient scapegoats in these troubled times.

Ryan's starport has degenerated considerably since Hard Times and today it is little more than a large plateau area paved over with concrete. There is no starport authority and nothing in the way of traffic control. Ryan's xenophobia might make the PCs' sudden arrival appear provocative. Therefore, the PCs should decide whether or not they wish to land at Ryan's starport. If they do not, they will have to select another site where they will not attract so much attention, but from which they will have to travel in order to reach the capital city of Donssen and its prison.

Choices

The PCs are thus presented with two methods of approach to Ryan's capital.

Landing at the Starport: The first choice has them landing at the starport. Should they do this, they will be met at the tarmac by a squad of a dozen militiamen wearing jacks and wielding shotguns. The militia commander, Darren Lagarur, will question the PCs about their business on Ryan. Persuading him to believe their story is a task for the PCs:

To convince the militia commander of their good intentions:

Difficult, Persuasion or Leader, Int, 5 minutes.

Referee: Failure results in the militiamen taking aggressive action against the PCs.

Should the PCs convince the militia leader of their good intentions, he will charge them Cr1000 in gold in order for their ship to remain unmolested for a week at the starport.

On the other hand, if the PCs fail to convince the militia leader, they will find themselves under arrest for unspecified crimes against the "sovereignty of the polity." The PCs can fight the militiamen or to be detained by them. If they fight and defeat the militiamen, they will be wanted by the local authorities, and their ship will definitely be impounded. If they allow themselves to be arrested, they will be stripped of their weapons.

and equipment, then thrown into prison with their fellow Antareans.

Landing Elsewhere: If the PCs choose to land their free trader elsewhere than the starport, this is a wise move, although it can prove tricky to an inexperienced pilot. Succeeding is a task:

To land the free trader elsewhere than the starport without mishap:

Difficult, Pilot, Dex, 5 minutes (fatal).

Referee: Failure indicates damage to both the PCs and their starship.

Success at the task means the PCs have set their ship down in the wilderness which surrounds Donssen city. Using their ships' air/raft, the PCs can then journey to the city with little fear of being accosted by the locals.

Encounters In Donssen

As the PCs explore the city and prepare for the rescue of Antarean officials from the prison, they see and hear a number of things which give them an idea of the situation on Ryan. Things are getting very bad. As loyal agents of the League of Antares, they should become disgusted by the depths to which this world has sunk since Brzk's death. The following are but examples of the sorts of things they might encounter:

- A member of the human supremacist group called Superioriti preaching on the street and blaming the Vargr for Antarean problems.

- Local militiamen patrolling the city, often randomly questioning "suspicious" individuals.

- Political discussions among people in which most seem to advocate cutting off nearly all contact with other worlds since such contact is "what brought us the Rebellion and the Hard Times."

In short, Ryan's people are not doing very well. Their outlook is becoming insular and their field of vision very narrow. Even if Brzk's assassination had not accelerated the process, it should be obvious that the League of Antares was, like most of the other factions, doomed to eventual failure and collapse.

Prison

The prison on the outskirts of Donssen is the eventual goal of the PCs if they are to rescue Admiral Djoulikian and his two companions. There are several ways to gain access to the prison. The referee should be prepared to adjudicate these based on the information given.

Attack: The first and most obvious is to attack the place, killing the guards

and launching an old-fashioned jail break. If the PCs are well-armed and skillful, such a plan might indeed work. There are 20 guards on duty at the prison, two in each tower and in the guard house, and one in each barracks area. All wear jack and carry auto rifles. Djoulikian and his compatriots are being held in the Antarean prisoner barracks. No one else is in that area. The other barracks hold a mix of prisoners, all of whom wish to escape.

Surrender: The second way to gain access to the prison is to be captured. This can happen in a number of ways, the easiest being to attack the militiamen at the starport as described above. Once captured, the PCs will be thrown in with Djoulikian and the others. They will have to devise a plan to get a weapon away from one of the guards. Then, they will have to begin their jail break as they see fit, hoping they survive against the guards.

Escape from Ryan

Once the PCs have freed the Antareans, they must still get off-planet alive. Depending on how successful they were in defeating the guards at the prison, they may or may not have an easy time leaving the planet. If the PCs quickly and stealthily killed every guard, they should be able to leave without much resistance. If they did not do so, they will be pursued. Any surviving guards will chase them in two air/rafts which the local military has stored up for such occasions. Up to five guards can fit into one air/raft.

The guards will chase the PCs back to their starship. If the PCs are docked at the starport, they will meet more resistance from the half-dozen guards stationed there. Even if they are not being pursued, they will still be questioned about the three men leaving with them. Convincing the guards to ignore them is a task:

To bribe the starport guards:

Difficult, Bribery, Persuasion, Instant.

Referee: Failure results in the guards attacking the PCs as rebels.

Thus, the PCs have quite a battle ahead of them no matter what they choose to do. The prisoners are considered quite valuable and will not be allowed to escape easily.

INTO THE OUTLANDS

When the PCs finally escape off-world, they will be beginning the second leg of their mission. From here, they must proceed to the world of Ereshkigal

(Antares 0716) in order to pick up three more Antarean officials. A subsector map is included in order to help them navigate through the uncontrolled space of Antares sector.

During their time in transit, Admiral Djoulikian will thank the PCs profusely for their help. He explains that Project Vesta has long been a contingency plan of the League in order to save key personnel should the unthinkable happen. Since 1125, Trasilon has suspected that the Rebellion would not so much end as wind down, with frightening results. As such, Vesta was conceived as a way to ameliorate the worst of these results. The Confederated Worlds of Ot Zell have been friendly with the League throughout the Rebellion, so they are a natural place to begin rebuilding. Ot Zell is safer and more orderly than is the core of Antares nowadays.

During the PCs' journey through the Outlands and Wilds of the subsector, use the ship encounter table found on page 91 of *Hard Times*. The subsector is rife with raiders of all sorts. Before the onset of Hard Times, the region was controlled by Vargr corsairs of the Antares Pact. While most of these corsairs have since disappeared, more than a few still exist, and they are more rapacious than ever before.

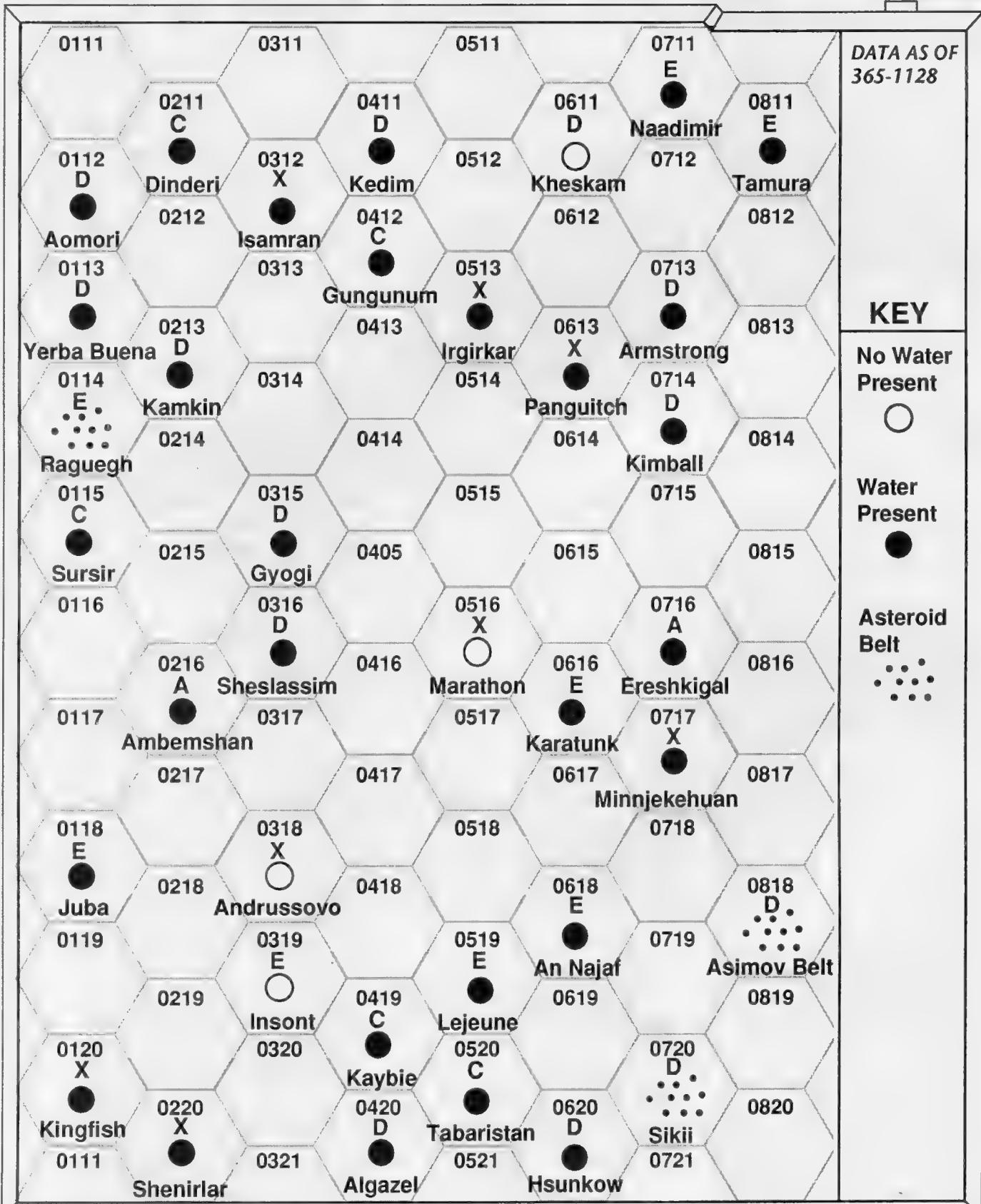
Ereshkigal

Ereshkigal is one of a few fairly high-tech worlds with a decent starport located in the Outlands of the sector. As such, it was a natural stopping-off point for the three other officials the PCs must pick up. Ereshkigal is a corporate state at present. The Ereshkigal Resource Consortium (ERCon) controls the planet and its few remaining resources in order to keep the world from sliding into oblivion. ERCon is not the best of governments, but it is trying.

Upon arriving at Ereshkigal, the PCs will meet with Sandra Rhees, ERCon's representative to outsiders. Rhee's welcomes the PCs and takes them to the other Antareans. When they reach the others, the PCs are surprised to find only two instead of three. Rhee's explains that the other Antarean, Dr. Colin Shakar, left recently aboard another starship for the world of Kheskam (Antares 0611 D8C5865-6), a failing world to coreward. Dr. Shakar was appalled to learn the state of Kheskam and decided to help the planet as best he could. The other two officials wanted to go as well, but they thought they should wait until the PCs arrived before leaving.

Kheskam has a corrosive atmosphere, and its technology is failing.

►SHURLARLEM SUBSECTOR (E/ANTARES)



Shurlarlem Subsector (E/Antares) as of 365-1128

Name	Hex	UWP	Class	PPG Alg	St/r	Zn/Sp
Aomori	0112	D525172-4	Lo Ni	402	M1 IV M7 D	Ou/F
Yerba Buena	0113	DA85487-8	Ni	103	F1D	Ou
Raguegh	0114	E000900-7	Hi Na In As	402	F2V	Ou
Sursir	0115	C87A132-4	Lo Ni Wa	604	F2VI	Ou
Juba	0118	E323983-8	Hi Na In Po	522	K5D	Ou
Kingfish	0120	X2236A9-3	Na Ni Po	811	G0V	Wi/F*
Dinderi	0211	C324132-5	Lo Ni	102	M9III	Ou
Kamkin	0213	D676761-7	Ag O:0114	103	F1V	Ou
Ambemshan	0216	A445700-9	Ag	913	M3V M6D	Ou
Shenirlar	0220	X5452B7-1	Lo Ni	801	F6d M9d	Wi/F
Isamran	0312	X77A6FA-4	Ni Wa	601	G4V M2D	Ou
Gyogi	0315	D223672-3	Na Ni Po	800	N1v	Ou/F*
Sheslassim	0316	D667676-5	Ag Ni	924	F1D M1D	Ou
Andrusovo	0318	X100710-6	Na Va	904	M0V M3D	Ou/F
Insont	0319	E5A7AA9-7	Hi Fl	203	K3D	Ou
Kedim	0411	D5481FE-6	Lo Ni	904	G8D M7d	Ou
Gungunum	0412	C844730-7	Ag	311	F6VI M2D	Ou
Kaybie	0419	C421565-B	Ni Po O:0114	521	K8II	Ou
Algazel	0420	D334542-8	Ag Ni	100	G7V	Wi
Irgirkar	0513	x847593-3	Ag Ni	500	G8VI MOD	Ou/F
Marathon	0516	X446458-5	Ni	105	G0V M5D	Ou
Lejeune	0519	E337AEC-5	Hi	203	F4D MOD	Ou
Tabaristan	0520	C223220-8	Lo Ni Po	910	A6IV G1D	Ou
Kheskam	0611	D8C5865-6	Fl O:0118	814	G6D	Ou/F
Panguitch	0613	X547774-2	Ag	504	F0D	Ou
Karatunk	0616	E140595-5	Ni Po De	110	F1V	Ou
An Najaf	0618	E4382C9-6	Lo Ni	903	M8V	Ou
Hsunkow	0620	D654310-5	Lo Ni	914	M5V	Ou
Naadimir	0711	E97A340-1	Lo Ni Wa	100	F9VI MOD	Ou/D
Armstrong	0713	D340896-6	Po De	112	F9D	Ou
Kimball	0714	D246665-7	Ag Ni O:0717	903	G7D M3D	Ou
Ereshkigal	0716	A300510-A	Ni Va	404	M3V	Ou
Minnjekehuan	0717	X533534-2	Ni Po	411	K3V	Ou
Sikii	0720	D000230-8	Lo Ni As	201	M2V M8D	Ou
Tamura	0811	E483540-4	Ni	114	G0V	Ou
Asimov Belt	0818	D000663-9	Na Ni As O:0714	104	M3V M7D	Ou

Alg (Allegiance): No world of this subsector is aligned with any polity or faction.

Zone: Ou: Outlands Wi: Wilds.

Special Indicator: F: Failing world D: Doomed world *: Population decrease.

Shurlarlem subsector was once controlled by the Antares Pact, a corsair band aligned with the League of Antares. Since Hard Times, the pact has broken up, and Shurlarlem is now a collection of independent worlds without any central authority. Many have become xenophobic and wary of outsiders.

Without the proper supplies, the population will soon be dead. Dr. Shakar went there in hopes of treating the dying, and he is awaiting further assistance.

Rhees offers to give the PCs the materials needed to help Kheskam last a little longer. She would like to offer more, but Ereshkigal cannot spare them right now.

Perhaps the PCs could deliver them and return at a later date with materials from Ot Zell.

The PCs must now choose their course of action. If they go to Kheskam, they may encounter more raiders along the way and they may be late for their rendezvous at Ambemshan. If they do not, they will be allowing an entire world to die because of their inaction. The PCs must make their choice. If they choose the latter, apply the optional bad karma rule from page 95 of Hard Times to starship encounters during their journey to Ambemshan. For what it is worth, Admiral Djoulikian thinks the PCs should

go to Kheskam and aid the planet as best they can.

Mission of Mercy

The journey to Kheskam allows for more starship encounters. Corsairbands are known to be particularly active the farther coreward one goes in the subsector. Nevertheless, the PCs arrive at Kheskam with little trouble. The world has little in the way of a starport any more, but when the PCs land, they will be met with a pleasant welcome. The

people of Kheskam hope the PCs have what they need to survive since Dr. Shakar told them to expect help soon.

Fortunately, Dr. Shakar was correct. The materials needed to aid the planet temporarily will be installed in order to keep out the planet's corrosive atmosphere. Yet, as Dr. Shakar will point out, this is only a stop-gap measure. The planet is rapidly failing. Something much more drastic must be done if Kheskam is not to become a failed world. Assistance will be needed in the future. He suggests that the League's government-in-exile in Ot Zell might consider a program of aid to failing worlds.

Finally, Dr. Shakar says he does not wish to leave Kheskam. He wants to remain to aid the wounded and dying. The League he once served is no more like the Imperium before it. He sees little value in running away to another sector in order to save himself, and he can do more good by remaining here than by going to Lishun. That is how he believes he can best keep the ideals of the League alive and make up for the crimes perpetrated by it in the name of parochial interests.

If any of the PCs agree with him, they are free to remain behind. None of the other Antarean officials, including Admiral Djoulikian, choose to do so. They want to escape to Lishun as quickly as possible.

Corsairs!

Sometime along their journey back to Ambemshan, the PCs will encounter a 440-ton Vargr corsair vessel which will immediately open fire on them. The insignia on the vessel indicates it was once part of the Antares Pact, a band formerly friendly toward the League. Now, the Antares Pact has become as racist toward humans as many humans have become toward the Vargr. The Vargr will assume the PCs to be enemies and will fight with them to the death.

No amount of negotiating will dissuade the Vargr—they are out for blood. They feel cheated by the League and its sudden collapse. At one time, Regent Brzktalked about the possibility of building a biracial society where human and Vargr worked together. Despite his talk, that never came to be, and when Brzkt was gone, the ideal was lost as well. Humans kill Vargr indiscriminately, and these Vargr corsairs have decided that now is their turn.

Ambemshan

Ambemshan is like Ereshkigal in that it has managed to retain some of its technology despite its isolation in the Outlands of the sector. Once the sub-sector capital and an important world in the League, today Ambemshan is anarchic and without a central government. It still serves as an outpost of civilization, but how long that will last remains to be seen.

The Trasilon transport vessel is at Ambemshan's type-A starport. The vessel is waiting for the PCs and for several other Trasilon vessels to bring back additional Antarean officials. This is to be a mass exodus of intelligentsia from Antares to Lishun sector. Antares is no longer stable enough to be used as a base. So many worlds have a poor opinion of the League and of Brzkt that it would no longer be possible to launch an effective reconquest campaign at the present time. Pulling back to Lishun and bidding their time is the government's only real option.

The player characters

will be thanked by their superiors for a job well done. If told about Kheskam, their superiors will say that they "will look into the matter." Thus, it seems unlikely that anything will ever be done in order to save that failing world. The more pragmatic officials will explain that nothing can be done for it, and trying would, therefore, be a waste of time. Bigger and better things are on the horizon.

The government is not running away from its problems—it is facing facts. The League of Antares is no more. If the death of dozens of worlds and billions of people in Antares alone is to have any meaning, the government must correct the mistakes of the past and prepare for better days. Ot Zell is the most defensible position the government can afford. By setting up there, the government can prepare for the future. It may be a while, but the time will come when the League of Antares or its ideals may once again come into existence. Like every other faction, the League failed miserably and is guilty of many injustices. For now, one must learn from those errors and seek to correct them in order to ensure that they never happen again.

ENDGAME

The PCs are now faced with a number of important choices. With the League of Antares gone, Trasilon is effectively gone as well. Thus, the PCs must decide whether they wish to remain working for the government-in-exile in Lishun or whether they will go off on their own. Shurlarlem subsector alone offers many opportunities to fight against the effects of Hard Times. Each world has a story all its own and a people to be saved.

Taking such a vocation can be quite rewarding for the PCs.

Whatever the PCs choose, none can deny that the future remains uncertain for both them and what little remains of the League of Antares.

NPCs

Guards on Ryan: 897677. Skills: Combat Rifleman-1, Brawling-1.

Admiral Cyrus Djoulikian: 7C9DCE. Age 65 (30). 11 terms. Skills: Fleet Tactics-4, Tactics-4, Leader-2, Computer-2, Forward Observer-1, Navigation-2, Ship's Boat-2, Vacc Suit-1, Mechanical-1, Gunnery-1, Electronic-1, Admin-1, JOT-1, Pilot-1, Ship Tactics-1, Linguistics-1, Handgun-1. Ω

Special thanks to Kevin Brennan and especially Charles Kimball, who generated Hard Times data for every world in Antares sector.

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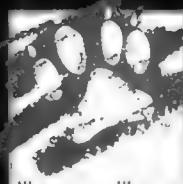
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WHITE WOLF
GAME STUDIO

Good Bad AND Vilani

By Clayton R. Bush



One departing ship is routed to retrieve a valuable cargo when the Vilani megacorporation Makhidkarun leaves its holdings in Gushemege sector during the Rebellion.

The plan is to collect the cargo from the local factor, Gar Tehanir. (A factor is a representative/broker who buys local goods, sells imports and sometimes has a stock of repair parts. Factor arrangements are

common where communication is broken and irregular.) Sounds simple enough.

Unfortunately, the matter is complicated by the factor's unexplained death. His aide says he was killed by local terrorists; local police deny the existence of terrorists; and several clues point to the aide.

Dates: All dates in this adventure correspond to the Imperial calendar. The starting date is 220-1117.

Place: The adventure begins at Ushulu highport. (Ushulu Gushemege 0137: C7829DA-A). Encounters take place among the confusion of families and work groups splitting up. With many shops closing, sales are common, and UTPs to acquire items will be one level easier than normal.

Characters: Characters are assumed to be cultural Vilani joining the exodus back to Vland.

Makhidkarun is abandoning its local holdings and retiring into Vland sector. Corporate officers have been hurriedly selling off holding companies and assets. Those who don't want to go Vland

with the ships are being discharged. The characters have been assigned room aboard the departing merchant *Darakha*; they are not part of the crew and will have to earn their passage.

Five tons of cargo (information and trade goods) marked "Property of Gar Rassouli" and assorted supplies are delivered to the dock. Arriving supplies include antiradiation and other medical drugs. With the ship half full, the PCs were called to the dispatching office. The post dispatcher meets them.

"We've decided to send you off early, to make a pickup. Our factor on Sirir should have a shipment ready. Contact him, load it and travel on up the Gushemege Main. Take along the factor and anyone else who wants to evacuate.

"The *Darakha* will also be carrying a movie crew (three actors and five technicians). The situation on Sirir is suitable for the action scenes they need, and it moves both of you toward Vland."

The dispatcher says that only one human-crewed ship can go to Sirir at a time. Why the *Darakha*? It is capable of carrying many extra people, and is small

TL11 First Imperium. Many plots involve thwarting members of some minor race—think of it as combining Bond, Dr. Who, and *Wild, Wild West*.

Enli Kanusgin is the over-the-hill actor who plays Zavon. He has done well by the role and enjoys it. Past his prime, he is nonetheless tall and commanding, and is a professional on the screen.

To get computer reports on Sirir:

Referee: Routine, Computer, Liaison (Uncertain).

Referee: The roll determines what information the party starts with.

Failure means that the characters

masks could inspire some paranoia, but the old bio-war diseases are a red herring.

On complete success, characters learn that Sirir is red zoned because its inhabitants want nothing to do with TL7+ goods. The planet's ruler, Baron Rassouli, pays a subsidy (taxes) to the Imperium to stay away. He has no relationship with the Imperium except that it recognizes his rule.

The planet is in the midst of growing turmoil and violence.

To locate someone who has been to Sirir on a previous occasion:



enough that it isn't wasting carrying capacity.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have three dozen more departures to arrange. If you have any more questions, try the station library."

To learn more about the film crew:

Routine, 15-Soc (Safe).

Referee: Yes, 15-Soc. "Zavon, Defender of Vland" is a long-running holovid series. In the series, Zavon is an agent charged with preserving order in Vland's

get only the subsector data, with Sirir's UWP (Gushemege 0131 X7969AA-6 Hi In), plus the fact that it is in the disputed area between the Dulinor faction and Strephon's Worlds faction. Only one human-crewed ship visits it each year, and Makhidkarun has had that contract for over 50 years.

On partial success, characters learn Sirir was important during the Rule of Man, but that a biological war during the Long Night devastated it. Noting that Sirir's tainted atmosphere requires filter

Impossible, Computer, Streetwise (Uncertain).

Referee: On success, the PCs learn that the "starport" is the personal airport of Baron Rassouli, the planetary ruler. A ship's boat landed one night and departed the next. The crew stayed at the factor's residence during the intervening day.

ARRIVAL

The trip to Sirir is uneventful. There is no orbital base for scout or naval inter-

Vipach Subsector (Gushemege M)

Sirir	0101	X7969AA-6	Hi In	R	723	Im	K3	V
Aapu	0102	D260345-6	Lo Ni De		300	Im	A1	III
Maerol	0105	E200774-8	Na Va		102	Im	K1	V
Choltonrul	0106	A487452-D	S Ni		224	Im	M6	IV
Ushulu	0107	C7829DA-A	Hi		700	Im	M0	V
Roolyz	0108	C333103-B	Lo Ni Po		222	Im	G8	V
Joutect	0110	B768145-C	N Lo Ni		600	Im	M0	V
Hentor	0201	D503540-5	Ni Va Ic		522	Im	M3	VI
Abaelou	0203	C695335-9	S Lo Ni		903	Im	M7	V
Gihmentahlish	0206	B8A5003-9	Lo Ni Fl		922	Im	K7	V
Strand	0207	C888300-0	Lo Ni Rw		502	Im	G4	V
Ounash	0209	X120335-4	Lo Ni Po De	R	504	Im	K9	V
Vaelouf	0303	B537343-9	Lo Ni		211	Im	M6	V
Endran	0304	C515034-B	Lo Ni Ic		103	Im	K3	IV
Phoenaeg	0308	D560867-5	S D7 Ri De		313	Im	G0	V
Sagal	0309	X887A9C-6	Hi	R	813	Im	K1	IV
Trichach	0402	C573489-8	S Ni		204	Im	M8	II
Cemloch	0403	B646002-9	S Lo Ni		405	Im	M2	V
Nemeet	0404	D2307CB-A	S Na Po De		704	Im	M8	V
Gwelbyph	0405	C42356A-8	S Ni Po		705	Im	K3	V
Flaslousk	0406	C5435A7-A	Ni Po		910	Im	M5	II
Jaeyelya	0407	B484655-4	S Ni		702	Im	K6	D
Lem	0408	D532216-8	S Lo Ni Po		900	Im	M9	V
Dimkodrarn	0409	B453465-E	S Ni Po		303	Im	G0	V
Rake	0501	C325531-A	Ni		302	Im	K3	V
Soel	0502	D8D578C-4	S Fl		202	Im	K0	V
Imagalu	0506	B967852-8	A Ri		904	Im	M0	V
Wols	0507	A764137-E	Lo Ni		200	Im	M6	V
Homage	0601	B59468C-8	N Ag Ni		512	Im	M2	V
Vipach	0602	C738447-B	S Ni		410	Im	K4	V
Sern	0604	CAD6268-7	Lo Ni Fl		600	Im	M0	V
Asiilish	0609	A565400-F	Ni		214	Im	K3	V
Chezpan	0610	B200777-B	Na Va		802	Im	K4	V
Th'dir	0702	B100464-E	S Ni Va		213	Im	M4	V
Dendaash	0703	A9C7331-B	N Lo Ni Fl		504	Im	A6	V
Zamashuug	0707	B585020-B	Lo Ni		300	Im	M3	V
Dikaash	0708	B6279B8-F	A Hi In Cp		101	Im	M4	V
Wilson	0710	B10037A-B	W Lo Ni Va		100	Im	M8	VI
Tenraash	0801	B79A557-F	Ni Wa		102	Im	G4	IV
Ginupa	0809	C55999C-C	S Hi		803	Im	G0	V
Teuterom	0810	B502412-D	Ni Va Ic		313	Im	M2	V
								M4 D

Highest tech level is F at Dikaash. Highest population is at Ginupa. There are no high-pop worlds with class-A starports. Dikaash handles upkeep on civilian, scout and naval vessels.

Jaeyelya is the homeworld of the Ael Yael, an intelligent avian race. Sagal was the Loeskalth homeworld, but that minor human race has thoroughly interbred with other human races over millennia. Strand is an Imperial reservation.

diction squadrons. The *Darakha* detects no ships here to enforce the system's interdiction—but they could be hiding. The ship refuels at the gas giant, then orbits the main world.

The world's clouds look reddish. Both poles have extensive icecaps, one extending down to the temperate zone. Major settlements are along the equator.

The characters, the film crew and five tons of cargo meet in the merchant's hangar to board the craft there. It is a nonstandard 40-ton craft used in the film series. The white, pearly hull delib-

erately resembles the flying saucer of Terran legend. Its gold-trim markings are strictly First Imperium. The movie crew films Zavon boarding the grav shuttle, then the characters board.

It is important that the captain give the highest-ranking character a computer chip with information on radio frequencies and how to identify the factor, *Gar Tehanir*, who is expected to meet them at the landing site. This exchange should provide the PCs some guidance on what is expected. Dealing with the highest ranking character reinforces Vilani use of status and title.

CULTURE

Sirir's society enforces its antitechnology bias through limiting property holding to one class, the *Gar* (notable) class. Any notable can confiscate anything from the other classes. The nonnotables have a self-sufficient economic system, with the notable system working to enforce the technology lid. Only notables have personal property. As long as his property is in a domicile or vehicle, or within eyesight of a notable, it will not be disturbed. Otherwise, another notable can confiscate it.

Since *Gar Tehanir* has been killed,

Continued on page 29.

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Continued from page 26.

his assistant, Sion, must find a new notable among the PCs, in order to claim the out-going cargo. Sion will not tell anyone what he is looking for. He is sure a notable will make himself evident by his actions. Keep in mind:

- Notables are self-confident and act without consulting others. Followers and bodyguards trail and surround them, while the notables seem to walk alone. One assistant or servant is allowed.

- Notables destroy high-tech (TL7+) goods they find. The military is TL7, and everyone else is limited to TL6.

- Notables are ignorant. Admitting higher education or training loses face.

- Notables publicly ignore lower classes.

Sirians deal with only one notable at a time exclusively. There is a rank hierarchy, but notables publicly deal with one another as equals.

FIVEDAY:

Reception Committee

The PCs' approach occurs at night, without running lights. The only guidance is a radio beam and a talking air traffic controller. After the ship lands, a small tractor tows the craft under a hangar. Two men with rifles guard the exits of the otherwise empty hangar. Five men transfer the five tons of cargo to a van. They do not respond to anything said in Galangic. Then they pile into the van and leave.

About two minutes later, a large sedan pulls up. Two men get out and wait.

When the PCs leave the craft, they discover that the gravity is 1.8G, and even through filters, the air smells sulfurous.

To think to have masks on when the door opens:

Routine, Intelligence, Age (Fateful).

Referee: A similar roll can be made for reaction to high gravity.

The apparent leader, Sion, is dressed in a very busy, plaid business suit. He was *Gar Tehanir's* assistant and is the only one who will say anything to the PCs. The other man has one arm in a sling and a pistol on his belt. He is Bi Guhin, the young driver.

Sion bows and says in halting Galangic: "Welcome, welcome, starpersons. I sorry *Gar Tehanir* not here to eye you. Most sorrowful."

The delegation will not volunteer that *Gar Tehanir* is dead. (They consider it bad luck to discuss a death at an introductory meeting.) The trade is almost finished, but someone will have to be

certified as notable to claim the cargo. That requires approval of personage in the middle office, and the middle office will not "eye" anyone until Sevenday. Which means a delay for the PCs.

After several exchanges, Sion asks, "Take you to *gardul* (*Gar Tehanir's* domicile)?" The word *gardul* refers to a notable's residence. Persisting in referring to it as "house" or "office" will lose a character's presumed notable status.

A sedan and a van carry everyone south to an airport gate. The drivers show passes, and the trip to the *gardul* is uneventful.

Sion: Sion was *Gar Tehanir's* assistant. He is also the leader of the Makhidkarun enclave on Sirir. His most prized possession is a Makhidkarun employee card showing 20 years of service.

Bi Guhin: Bi Guhin was *Gar Tehanir's* driver. He served one term in the planetary army's K-9 Branch, and trained the four cougar-like *badans* that guard the *gardul*. He will not fire on army troops.

Gardul

The gates at *Gar Tehanir's* *gardul* are newly barred. The driver, Bi Guhin, jumps out and locks the gate behind the cars. The three natives look around furtively, ushering everyone inside. Once everyone is inside, Bi Guhin opens a side door in the entranceway, brings out four *badans* (cougars) that snarl at everyone, and puts them out in the yard. Then he drops a beam across the door, gets an assault rifle from a cabinet, turns, smiles, and goes upstairs. *Gar Tehanir's* death has inspired some paranoia within the *gardul*, and the household fears a new attack.

If the PCs want to leave, Sion will say this is a "no-time zone," while tomorrow will be a "yes-time zone." He is trying to say there is a curfew. The *badans* offer a deterrent to characters who may want to sneak out during the night.

The PCs can freely ask questions here. They may learn the following:

When *Gar Tehanir* went to town on Twoday, several terrorists surrounded the car. *Gar Tehanir* drew a gun, and the car was shot up. Bi Guhin got out, but *Gar Tehanir* did not. The attackers jumped in the car and drove away. The car was returned several hours later by the police. *Gar Tehanir's* body has not been returned.

Gar Tehanir was wearing his translation computer at the time of the attack. As they were high-tech, the translator and disks were probably destroyed by the police. The party is seemingly dependent on Sion's translations, and there aren't any spare language disks.

Authorities deny that any incident occurred.

PCs may choose to explore the *gardul*. They will be given free reign, within reason. Characters may notice that all communications on the planet are fiber-optic landline. There are no radio or TV stations, but *Gar Tehanir's* office has a computer. Computer bulletin boards and information are business-oriented and deal with trading between notables.

Searching the files in *Gar Tehanir's* office shows that the last entry was made on Twoday. The engagement calendar shows a dinner for Baron Rassouli the next night.

SIXDAY: Outing

The next morning, Sion wakes everyone up personally. The recording crew needs to get started early because they only have a limited time to shoot. After breakfast, Sion directs one PC (a promising notable) to accompany him. He will shoo anyone else back—others can follow, but the two must walk alone. In the market place, Sion tells the character to pick food. Nothing is paid for. If the character insists on paying, Sion will take him back to the *gardul* and try someone else.

Sion, not himself a notable, needs someone who acts like a notable to get more food for the state dinner with Baron Rassouli. Only notables can have property, so one must be around to "own" the food. Bills will be sent to the *gardul*/later.

Baron's Visit

The rest of the day, the film crew continues recording, and everyone is preparing for the dinner. The PCs may detect that the film crew plans to film the dinner, with Zavon in full regalia.

To detect the film crew's plans:
Simple, Intelligence (Safe).

Referee: Zavon is generally unpopular in Gushemege because the sector was conquered and suppressed by the Vilani. There could be a major row at dinner if Zavon wears his regalia.

Baron Rassouli arrives for dinner as planned. Tall and commanding, he will look over everyone, searching for the most obvious notable. If no PC fills the notable role at this point, Zavon is a good candidate. Baron Rassouli has never seen Zavon's show and will not take offense at the show's treatment of some local races. He will recognize the First Imperium uniform and speak against repressive Vilani rule.

Baron Rassouli speaks Galangic through an imported translator (a necessary high-tech evil). He will talk only to the notable, ignoring anyone else.

During dinner, he will talk of filming, hunting, scouting, military weapons and his direct lineage to the Loeskalth rulers of this world (Loeskalth are a minor human race that ruled a small interstellar state in Gushemege sector approximately 6700 years ago). He will not discuss trace. His people want static technology, period. He will not raise the general tech level. If Gar Tehanir's attack is mentioned, he will deny that any opposition exists. While off-worlders may feel that the planet's society is violent, it is popularly supported. A ruling class of limited education with total ownership of property prevents increasing the technology level.

SEVENDAY: Middle Office

The day starts with Sion sending the designated notable off to get the appropriate papers. He filled in all the necessary forms, which he gives to the character, but he can't accompany him into the office. Bi Guhin, the young driver, will accompany the character and actually present the papers—the character just has to act notable. The film crew will want to go along, and any other characters are welcome.

The sedan and van used to bring the characters to the *gardul* are considered inappropriate for visiting the office of record. The *gardul*'s damaged formal car would make a better impression. That car looks beat-up, and examination shows patched bullet holes.

Roleplay events in the office according to the character. The best route is to act notable: Walk in and look around for anything you want, perhaps confiscating property left unattended. Or maybe beat up a bureaucrat or anyone acting snobbish. Language could be a problem, but notables don't normally say very much. Bi Guhin will explain that the notable is from a distant place.

Ambush

On the way back, the PCs' car encounters a vehicle blocking the road. When Bi Guhin stops the car, several armed people surround them. "Everyone out! No trouble, and no one gets hurt!"

The terrorists have two SMGs and some hunting rifles. One holds a voice recorder which just played out the message above. They will not harm anyone unless the characters resist. The film crew will have to leave any unconcealed weapons being used for recording in the

car, or they will be shot at. The attackers want the car and will not spend time searching the characters' persons. Neither will they explain who they are or why they want the car.

In any fight, Bi Guhin will be seriously wounded defending the characters. He will not be much help for several days.

It is a 10-kilometer walk back to the *gardul*. Check for fatigue.

Planning

By now, the characters have seen many examples of the growing unrest on Sirir. When they organize an evacuation, some 70 to 80 residents of all ages will be interested in leaving. Since the group can't go to Baron Rassouli's private airport, the shuttle will have to find the *gardul* from the air at night and make three trips to ferry everyone up to the orbiting starship.

The group will have to decide which PCs and NPCs go to the shuttle, with a view to finding the *gardul* from the air. An inertial locator would be wonderful, or else they will have to find some landmarks. A radio beacon would work, if the group brought a radio, but this will bring paramilitary forces to a suspected terrorist supply drop.

To end the discussion (or when it is over), Sion calls the notable to the office. He tells the notable to be at the starport in an hour.

Starport

Some 60 tons of cargo will be delivered to the starport, marked "Property of Gar (PC notable's name)." If the PCs are not there on time, other notables (like the one delivering it) may confiscate part of the cargo before they arrive.

While waiting for nightfall, the film crew records events around the starport. The situation outside escalates steadily, testing the player characters' threshold for danger.

A mob forms outside the south end of the starport, and a squad armed with pistols and batons trots within 10 meters of the hangar heading toward the south gates.

The PCs see their hijacked car race up the road to the starport gate and explode. The car bomb breached the gate, and the mob pours through, with civilians running rampant through the port buildings, spraying graffiti on walls and tossing leaflets. No physical violence against any person, just property damage.

Within a half hour, police arrive from the city and surround the field. When about 2000 gendarmes have assembled, the gendarmes begin beating up the crowd, and civilians flee toward the hangar. By now it is twilight. As the

fastest runners pass the hangar, a series of explosions can be heard from the city. A 20-story skyscraper falls to the ground.

At some point an unregistered white, gold-trimmed craft will leave the airport. Its departure will interest several military headquarters.

Evacuation

The only landing spot is atop the *gardul*'s roof. This requires passengers to climb up a ladder. Each trip can transport 30 to 40 people (counting kids) to orbit. A round trip takes about an hour and a half. The evacuation can be very simple—the scene is similar to films of helicopters evacuating the U.S. Embassy during the fall of Saigon.

The four *badans* are caged. Bi Guhin has been told to leave them, but he will assist anyone trying to transport them. A character may recall that zoos will pay about Cr5000 for live carnivores.

To dock with *Darakha*:

Routine, Vehicle, Dexterity (Fateful).

To find the *gardul* from the air:

Routine, Intelligence (Safe).

Referee: Using a radio makes success automatic (although the time would vary), but will bring in antiterrorist gendarmes looking for any active rebel headquarters.

To hover over the roof:

Simple, Vehicle, Dexterity.

Referee: The pilot knows the site, which compensates for the handicaps. (Do not tell the characters that.)

During the shuttling of people off-planet, torch lights assemble at the edge of the residential district. Shots are heard, and fires begin to break out. The noise moves closer and closer to the *gardul*. The film operators will not want to leave until the last shuttle trip. However, they plan to be aboard that last shuttle, so they film from the roof.

Either rioters or police will descend on the *gardul* before the evacuation is complete. An escalating series of encounters is possible. Events and their resolution depend entirely on the group's preparations and weapons. In ground combat, remember that this is a high-gravity world, so handicap the characters accordingly.

The grav shuttle has a sandcaster. Using Forward Observer skill, the characters can have it fire on a crowd. The sandcaster can also be used as a defense against air-defense helicopters and aircraft. Ω

Date: 212-1129

Anaxias/Delphi (1724 A253A85-D/Green)

¶One more apocalyptic group has appeared in the ravaged outlands of the Massilia, Diaspora, and Old Expanses sectors. Calling itself the Beedling Society, the group is dedicated to the preservation of technical and scientific knowledge in a time when these seem to be threatened.

¶The Beedlings are concerned that the trends of the current "Hard Times" will result in a collapse of Imperial culture over at least certain portions of the Imperium, and the technical and scientific knowledge that stands to be lost in such a collapse will greatly delay the chances of recovery.

¶Therefore, the Beedlings have announced their plans to establish caches of knowledge throughout the Massilia, Diaspora, and Old Expanses sectors. These caches will include automated teaching facilities, supplies of crucial spare parts for selected high-technology items, and extensive databases containing a wide variety of information equivalent to a subsector university. These caches will be built deep underground, contain autonomous power sources, and be hardened against nuclear blasts.

¶The group takes its name from the beedling, a burrowing creature native to the Beso system (2713 Diaspora/Red). The beedling lives on a world orbiting the bright, K2 star of the Beso binary system. The world's orbit is highly eccentric, most of it being far outside the habitable zone, and most of the remainder being in the inner inhospitable zone. Twice during the planetary year the world passes through the habitable zone, and during this period, short-life-cycled plants and animals appear, as does the beedling, which hibernates in its burrows through the long cold and short hot seasons, to emerge when conditions are favorable for it. The Beedlings intend that the knowledge they preserve will be likewise preserved through inhospitable times so that it can emerge again when the time is right.

¶The Society is visiting Delphi in hopes of gaining financial backing from Margaret's government. It has already constructed four such caches at secret locations in Diaspora, but needs further funding to continue its work and expand into other sectors. It is expected that this visit will meet with success, as Margaret is a known supporter of programs to preserve the former Imperial infrastructures.

Antares/Antares (2421 A762ADA-D)

Date: 271-1129

¶The archducal station of Cerise, home of Regent Brzk and most of the government of the League of Antares, was lost with all hands after an uncontrolled fusion reaction in the station's power plant.

¶This shocking event claimed the lives of Regent Brzk, his family, and most of the high-level political and military leaders of the League.

¶As of yet, no one has claimed responsibility for this terrorist action, but most analysts believe either Lucan's Imperium or the anti-Vargr human supremacist group Superioriti is responsible.

¶At the present time, the League government is in confusion as what remains of the political hierarchy scrambles to maintain control and designate a successor to Regent Brzk.

Antares/Antares (2421 A762ADA-D)

Date: 335-1129

¶Yet another blow came to the League of Antares as its remaining political leadership proved incapable of finding a successor to the assassinated leader Brzk.

¶As a result, rioting and civil unrest are on the rise. Racism against the Vargr is growing as well.

¶Numerous worlds on the frontiers of the League have seceded from the League, which they consider to be unviable as a government without the leadership of Brzk.

¶In short, the League is breaking up into its individual worlds. Most analysts predict that the League will not last as a cohesive body much beyond the end of this year.

¶When questioned about this, League spokesperson Marcus Hashan stated that "plans are already under way to ensure that the ideals of Brzk and the League of Antares do not die with the Regent himself."

Trevor/Core (0125 C664000-7/Amber)

Date: 058-1130

¶The triumphant forces of the true Emperor Dulinor have won their first victory in the territory of the murderous pretender Lucan, having crushed the system defense forces of this border world.

¶Dulinor has announced that this, his final campaign, will move forward as destiny demands, to claim the throne once and for all. Dulinor will not rest until he places his foot on Lucan's neck and destroys the last force that has brought so much despair and destruction to his beloved Imperium.

¶Dulinor has also announced a policy of clemency to all Imperial troops who rally to his banner during this final drive on Capital.

Dinhe/Core (0523 B590463-9/Amber)

Date: 068-1130

¶The forces of Archduke Dulinor, murderer of Emperor Lucan's uncle, Strephon I, have dared to send military forces into Lucan's frontier worlds for the first time since his defeat of 1124 drove him back to his home sector.

¶Although the defending forces inflicted serious damage on the invading fleet, they were not able to prevent Dulinor from refueling and jumping to the next target in this wanton and destructive invasion.

¶The Dinhe defense forces held their own early in the battle, as they were defending well-known territory, but intelligence reports indicate that the tide began to turn when Dulinor's forces unleashed a superweapon which overwhelmed the bravery of their defense.

¶Emperor Lucan had warned several times that Dulinor was engaged in unearthing and re-creating ancient doomsday weapons, and this may now be proven to be true. However, Dulinor's fleet is a long way from friendly territory, and Imperial Navy scouts are well aware of its movements. The full force of Lucan's Navy will soon fall on it with a force no weapon can withstand.





RAVELLER NEWS SERVICE

Celetron/Core (0922 A375000-F)

Date: 079-1130

¶Celetron, the site of Imperial Research Station Omicron, was savagely attacked today by a large fleet under the command of the assassin Dulinor, in one last mad attempt to destroy the rightful Imperial government.

¶Dulinor, known to have gone mad now that he possesses what he believes to be unstoppable superweapons produced by his Droyne slaves, dishonorably defeated the valiant Imperial forces defending this strategic system.

¶A major target of this attack was the Imperial scientific outpost Omicron, where Dulinor's forces landed commando troops who ransacked the station's databanks, looking for more information to fuel Dulinor's twisted ambitions. This attempt failed, as the commandos were unable to return to their landers to make their escape, but were instead defeated by the resourceful scientists on the base who fought to defend their research from corrupt use.

¶This battle further sapped the strength of the invader, who will find he is still as far from Capital as if he had remained with his daughter at his home on Dlan. A man who wages war by treachery and deceit, by assassination and secret ancient weapons can never win the final victory.

¶The Celetron system defense squadron is regrouping, and will not be found by Dulinor to be a welcome opponent the next time.

Dlan/Ilelith (1021 A8D1ADE-G)

Date: 186-1130

¶Emperor Dulinor appeared to his subjects today in an announcement filmed in the throne room on Capital, proving that he has finally made good on his promise to defeat the traitorous usurper Lucan and reign as the rightful Emperor of the Third Imperium.

¶In the brief presentation, the new Emperor spoke directly to his subjects, announcing the end of the long period of Rebellion against his legitimate succession and rule.

¶"My people all over the Imperium, I speak to you from the Iridium Throne. I, Dulinor Astrin Ilethian, am finally and irrefutably the Emperor of the Third Imperium. I have crushed the vile murderer Lucan and will work to finally establish justice for all Imperial citizens."

¶"The journey to this day has been a long one, and you have all sacrificed much, but your sacrifices have not been in vain, for they have put me here where I can at last fulfill my mission to you. I ask you to put aside the hard feelings you might have against those who fought for other causes in which they believed. The fact that Imperial citizens were forced to make war on one another is one of the diseases that I have dedicated myself to cure from the moment I first accepted the succession. The crime of this long Rebellion cannot poison us against one another. We must put the Rebellion behind us and move forward to the future that awaits us all."

¶"The Rebellion is over! Long live the Imperium!"

Anaxias/Delphi (1724 A253A85-D/Green)

Date: 210-1130

¶A 200-ton Far Trader crashed into the floating city of Rheanon yesterday, killing over 5000. This is the largest loss of life thus far in the increasingly terrifying pattern of rebelling technology.

¶Speculation is that an extremely dangerous and effective computer virus is at work, and measures are being taken to control its spread. Evidence so far indicates that it is able to defeat currently existing computer security programs, and that normal reconfiguration and reformatting measures have no effect.

¶Omni-spectral electromagnetic tests are being conducted to see if there is a broadcast radiation that is propagating the virus into many systems simultaneously. However, some say that the sudden coordinated appearance of these symptoms shows that the infection has been long since completed, and we are now only seeing the effects of something that is too late to prevent.

¶Government sources report that emergency caches of computers will be broken out and distributed on a case-by-case basis to replace failed systems in an attempt to control the situation.

¶Margaret confirmed this report and cautioned the need for calm while visiting some of the hospitalized victims of the tragic lift bus-orbital shuttle accident of two days ago.

¶In a possibly related story, the Delphic Archive reports that their records database is showing large gaps in its electronic storage files. Records reported missing include genealogical and census data for the years 572-913, tax records for the past 25 years, and data on toxic waste disposal standards throughout Delphi sector.

Gakhu/Ilelith (2607 C474756-A/Amber)

Date: 243-1130

¶In a bizarre chain of events, Archduke Dulinor, claimant to the Iridium Throne, was killed today. The Archduke was present on the world's surface following the crash landing of his flagship *Clarion* two days ago. Erratic computer functioning caused *Clarion* and the accompanying Coronation Fleet to pause in the system while repair and diagnostic work could be performed.

¶Two days ago, *Clarion*'s computer erroneously fired the ship's main engines, forcing the vessel out of orbit into the Gakhuan atmosphere. Only at the last minute was the ship's crew able to regain control of the vessel to effect a "semi-soft" landing in a cultivated field. Structural damage to the ship was said to be negligible, but her crew did not want to risk flight again until the computers could be certified as repaired. In the meantime, all circuits to her maneuver drive were disconnected to prevent recurrence of the spontaneous engine firing.

¶Unfortunately, the response of the Gakhuan to this unanticipated visit by their leader was not welcoming. There had been a steadily growing crowd assembling around the *Clarion*'s crashed hulk, jeering at the man who, only 57 days ago, broadcast triumphant footage of himself seated on the Iridium Throne. Gakhuan, like every other world along the Ilelith Federation frontier, has suffered at the hands of Lucan's Black War raiders and then freelance raiders striking from out of the Outlands and Wilds. Furious at Dulinor's reappearance after he had assured them that peace and a final end to the war was at hand, they chanted around the clock, "Dulinor, bring us peace."

We were surprised to receive radio transmissions from the Out-Law section of West Virginia. After all, we didn't think there were any people left there since those things moved in.

ROAD WORK

By Michael C. LaBossiere

This adventure takes place in Ohio and West Virginia and is intended for a group of Experienced PCs. The characters are hired to bring supplies and equipment to a group of human survivors in Demonground-infested West Virginia. In actuality, the PCs are being lured into an elaborate Dark Minion trap.

PLAYER BACKGROUND

The following information can be made available to the players. The exact amount revealed and how the players become aware of it are left to the referee's discretion:

The state of West Virginia has recently fallen almost entirely Out-Law, with little or no federal authority present in most areas. Even local authority has diminished or vanished entirely. Because of the horrible conditions, most people have left West Virginia for better areas. However, people fleeing the state often reported that others were unable to leave, for whatever reason. In order to substantiate these claims, a small military force led by Captain Daniel Jeffreys entered West Virginia. Contact was lost several hours after the force entered West Virginia, and no one expected to hear from Jeffreys or his men ever again. Naturally, it came as quite a surprise when two weeks after contact had been lost, Jeffreys came out of West Virginia with news of a large group of survivors.

REFEREE

West Virginia is now infested with Dark Minions. Those who could flee did so as fast as their mode of transportation could carry them. Those who didn't make it out died, or worse. There is no federal, state or local authority left intact in most of West Virginia.

It is, overall, a really bad place to be.

Captain Jeffreys' expedition was attacked by Dark Minions and their allies when they entered Demonground. Most of the force died in battle, but several soldiers, including the captain, were taken alive. Most of these soldiers died in horrible Dark Minion experiments, but Jeffreys and Sergeant Slade Miller were kept alive. Their brains were altered by Dark Minion surgery, and they were sent out to lure others into the Dark Minion trap.

Once Captain Jeffreys returns, he will begin recruiting assistance and raising money to purchase equipment and supplies for the "survivors." His recruiting efforts will be geared at those who

have fought the Dark Minions or at least know about them. Jeffreys may contact the PCs if he knows about them or if other people he has contacted know about them. Or the PCs may see one of his ads.

Jeffreys has chosen Columbus, Ohio, as his base of operations. He has acquired an empty warehouse in the downtown area and is using it as his staging area. He will conduct interviews of potential recruits in a small office in the warehouse. During the interviews, he will make subtle hints about strange things being on the loose in West Virginia and will attempt to draw information from the interviewee. If Jeffreys believes that a person knows about the Dark Minions, he will hire him for the job. Naturally, the interviews should be run so that all the PCs get hired.

The exact amount each recruit is paid for the mission depends on his skill, experience and reputation. Jeffreys is willing to give some up-front money for equipment or whatever might be needed. He will also promise bonus money.

Jeffreys will give a rough description of the mission to those he interviews, but only those actually hired get the full story. Jeffreys will tell the people he has hired that they will be taking several truckloads of equipment and supplies to a large group of survivors who are holding out in West Virginia. He says that he intends to give them the means to keep on living. He also says that this is the first step in reclaiming West Virginia.

Of course, the actual purpose of the mission is to lure people who oppose the Dark Minions to their deaths, and to bring supplies and equipment to the Dark Minions in the West Virginia Demonground.

CONVOY

The convoy consists of two HMMWVs with mounted M60 machineguns, one Orca 2½-ton truck configured to carry passengers, and two Kenilworth Pile-driver semitrailer tractors hauling enclosed trailers. Most of the trailers' cargos consist of mundane items like building material, food, medical supplies and so forth. There are also weapons in the trailers' cargos. One of the trailers has a box containing 10 M16A2s (the box is labeled as containing AR-15s), 20 30-round clips and 300 rounds for each weapon. Another box contains 10 Ingram M10 .45s (the box is labeled as containing propane canisters), 20 clips and 200 rounds for each weapon. Another box containing an M2HB and four belts is labeled as containing a stove. A box labeled as containing pipes actually



THE THOUSAND-YEAR IMPERIUM IS DEAD!

When I was a child, Grandfather told us stories at night, stories of dukes and admirals, of galaxy-spanning empires, of star fleets locked in titanic battles. And he showed us the shiny radiation scars he had earned in those battles, scars which were red and ugly and came flickeringly to life in the dancing firelight.

None of the others believed the stories. Some said they must have happened generations earlier than Grandfather's time—others said they could never have happened.

But I believed. And late at night I looked up and dreamt of the stars, and of others like myself on the cold worlds circling them who must also look up and dream.

And I knew that one day, somehow, I would walk among them.

An emperor shot down in cold blood. A hundred BatRons turned to glowing vapor in titanic battles. A thousand worlds ravaged, burnt, and broken.

And then came the Virus.

Developed from silicon-based life forms, designed as a weapon to attack enemy computer systems, released by a commando raid before safeguards and controls could be perfected, the Virus swept human space with the speed and destructive power of a firestorm.

Computer defenses designed to stop invasive programs slowed it up, but none of them could stop it for long, because the Virus was alive, self-aware, and intelligent.

It was also mad.

Now, 75 years later, the star-spanning Imperium and its technological wonders are a dim memory. What remains besides ruins, decayed artifacts, and pockets of civilization clinging desperately to their preserved knowledge?

The unbowed human spirit.

THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

When I hit the Hiver technical curriculum, it was as if I'd come home for the first time. This was where I belonged, and it's where I would have stayed if the first expeditions into The Wilds had turned out differently. But all of that came later.

I loved deep-space astrogation, loved it with a passion I'd never felt before. Putting a jump ship "into the hole" at just the right angle of attack so that 150 hours later it climbed out three parsecs away with the exact

residual momentum to throw it to within skimming distance of a gas giant was the most beautiful thing I'd ever done.

There was a logic, an elegance to it that I'd never imagined existed, and nobody was better at it than I was. Nobody.

Although Traveller: The New Era is set after the spectacular collapse of a star-spanning civilization, it is not a game about endings—it is a game about beginnings. It is the beginning of a new dawn as humanity re-discovers the worlds it once owned and the knowledge it once commanded.

It is about an era rich in adventure. Players explore long-abandoned worlds; recontact cultures which have regressed to primitive status or retreated into xenophobic superstition; help rebuild struggling societies and damaged ecosystems; conduct trade, diplomacy, and even espionage into unknown or little-known regions.

The New Era is a time when individuals make a difference again, and the players are on the cutting edge of that era.

Humanity's birthright will not be denied. Once again—once and for all—mankind will own the stars.



THE HARD EDGES OF SPACE

When we found out what happened to the crews of those first ships we sent into The Wilds, it was as if everyone went a little crazy. Or maybe we all just grew up. Maybe there isn't a lot of difference. Veronique had been on one of those ships—sweet, brilliant, gentle Veronique.

Grandfather, by then a white-haired patriarch, stood in council and spoke for a long time—spoke about what it must have been like for the people in The Wilds to have lost so much so quickly. The memory of what had been before was still strong in him—strong enough that he could understand what the loss of it could have done to people, could have driven people to do. And he wanted all of us to understand, too.

I understood. I understood better than Grandfather. This was disease—disease worse than the Black Death, worse than the Virus. And we had the cure ...star-hot plasma and RAMgrenades and coherent light. I said as much.

Things were never the same between Grandfather and me after that. There was just too much of the past in him to have much heart for the future...or much stomach for it.

Once human-settled space was reasonably uniform, but those days are gone. The diversity of post-Imperial human space is typified by four regions.

- **The Regency:** What was once known as the Domain of Deneb is now the Regency, the self-proclaimed keeper of the Imperial flame. Protected from the spread of the Virus by the tide of Vargr invasions as well as the currents of the Rebellion itself, the Regency erected a strict quarantine which preserved it from contamination. Only here is there a remnant of the old Imperium with a sense of continuity with the past.

- **Pocket Empires:** Here and there throughout the old territory of the Imperium are small groups of worlds which have re-established space flight and trade. These pocket empires are isolated islands in a sea of anarchy.

- **The Rim:** Along the trailing rim of old Imperial territory are a handful of worlds which have partially recovered from The Collapse with Hiver technical assistance. Having tried to re-establish trade and diplomacy with The Wilds by peaceful means, and having suffered terrible losses doing so, they have now begun a more vigorous campaign. They are called Reavers or, by some, Star Vikings.

- **The Wilds:** The vast majority of the Old Empire is made up of Wilds, ruined worlds struggling in ignorance and barbarism. On many of these worlds there remain relics of pre-Collapse technology, and these are used by small ruling elites to force absolute obedience by the masses of the population, medieval subsistence agriculture existing side-by-side with grav tanks and battledress-equipped feudal overlords.

A DIFFERENT GAME FOR A DIFFERENT ERA

By the time we hit Hastaan and liberated it from the benevolent rule of its "God-Emperor" (I am not joking), we had the drill down pretty tight. We were on the ground before his air defense network had a decent fire control lock, inside the city before his troops had the guntracks powered up, and inside his palace before anyone thought to button it up. Then we hit his Sacred Guard, 500 of the roughest, toughest guys he had.

They were probably pretty good at shoving sobusters and stealing chickens, but when it came to a real fight, they were just another bunch of jerks in silly outfits. We found out later their motto was "Death Before Defeat."

All they got wrong was the order.

Traveller: The New Era is more than just a change in background; it's a major revision of the game system that all existing Traveller players should welcome. This revision has two principal features.

A Compatible System: The new game uses a new system—at least it's new for Traveller. We've used the GDW House System for the game, because it provides a number of exciting advantages.

- The House System is a third-generation game system, with rich and detailed character generation and a heavy emphasis on roleplaying.
- Fast, realistic combat, a major improvement over the old Traveller/MegaTraveller system.
- An elegant, realistic task resolution system which is the unifying game mechanic throughout the system and which combines skills, attributes, and difficulty level in one D20 roll.
- Completely compatible with *Twilight: 2000*, *Dark Conspiracy*, and *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs*, GDW's other house roleplaying games. Not only can characters cross over from one game to another, but animals, vehicles, weapons, and equipment are usable across game lines as well, expanding the volume of useful supplements tremendously.

A Universal System: The basic Traveller game retains its setting in one historical time line and one possible pattern of future technological development. However, with the publication of the *Traveller Technical Architecture*, the game becomes expandable to fit any science-fiction milieu desired.

Technical Architecture provides design sequences for starships, vehicles, weapons, and other equipment, and explores different technological approaches to weapons and transportation—stutterwarp, star gates, matter transmitters, and more. It also provides useful ideas on universe-building, for players and referees yearning for a trip into the genuine unknown.

A UNIVERSE TO EXPLORE...

A UNIVERSE OF SUPPORT MATERIAL

The resources GDW has already poured into the New Era project are just the down payment on its commitment to a renewed and revitalized Traveller product line. In 1993, Traveller resumes its place as GDW's flagship game line, led by the following releases:

Traveller®: The New Era

The new core product in the Traveller line, this book contains all of the rules necessary to play the game: character generation, tasks and skills, travel and exploration, combat, nonplayer characters (human and alien), planetary encounters (including unusual flora and fauna), world generation, and more, as well as a broad assortment of equipment, weapons, vehicles, and spacecraft.

Starship Combat

Although the basic game includes rules for resolving hostile encounters in space, this product expands those rules into a rich and detailed board-game. Useful for single-ship encounters as well as squadron actions, Starship Combat breaks down the barrier which used to exist between these two and integrates them into a coherent whole.

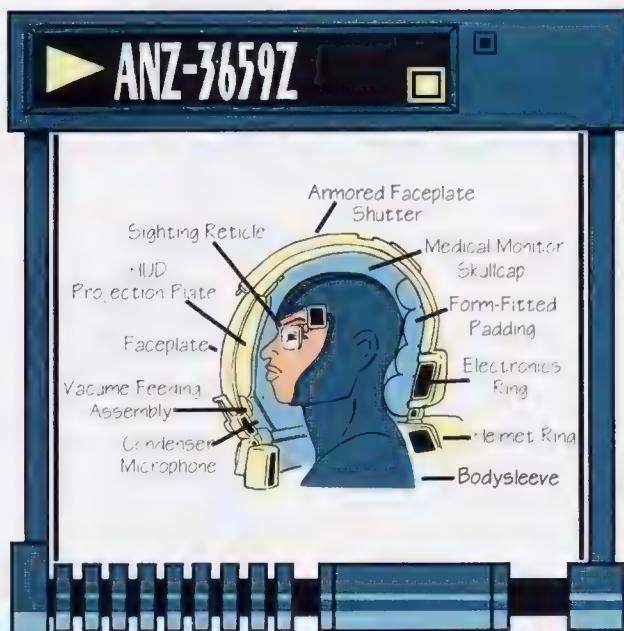
The Technical Architecture

Ever wonder what an MHD turbine was and how it worked? Ever want to calculate the range at which a laser stopped being dangerous? This book is for you!

No science-fiction game has ever offered a product of this scope or vision before, and yet it is the very essence of science fiction.

First, the Technical Architecture provides a layman's explanation of the *real* science behind the numbers in Traveller, addressing issues such as acceleration, gravity, power generation, laser light dispersion, and much more. Then it provides design and construction formulae for vehicles, spacecraft, weapons, sensors, and more.

Finally, it examines technologies and gives design sequences for systems not normally found in Traveller. This enables you to use Traveller's game rules to re-create almost any science-fiction universe found in popular literature, or create your own.



Deluxe Traveller®

Combining the New Era rules with the Technical Architecture and a variety of playing aids, Deluxe Traveller becomes the ultimate science-fiction role-playing game, a genuine paper time machine.

Reavers

Where do the Star Vikings come from, where are they going, and why? This first region sourcebook is rich in adventure material and background, covering the Old Expanses where the Star Vikings are based, their Hiver patrons, and The Wilds they have sworn to tame.

Survival Margin

How did the Imperium die? How did the Virus work? And what forces have arisen to fill the vacuum in the 70 years since? Survival Margin bridges the historical gap between MegaTraveller and Traveller: The New Era, plus offers guidelines for referees to update their campaigns and convert MegaTraveller characters to the new system.

Challenge

Challenge magazine continues to support all science fiction gaming, but with the release of New Era, it will focus more on Traveller, providing a constant stream of optional rules, new equipment, and unusual adventures.

Miniatures From RAFM

We're really excited at the prospect of RAFM's new line of Traveller 25mm figures, which we know will capture the exciting feel of the new game.

Equally important, and an historic first, will be the line of detailed Traveller starships, designed for use with the Starship Combat rules. With luck, these will release at about the same time as the boardgame.

Novels

Although we have allowed authors to set their worlds in the Traveller universe in the past, we have never had a GDW-sanctioned Traveller novel. That's going to change as well. Although it's too early to say anything definite, we're sure you're going to like what we have in mind.

Afew nights after the player characters hear the rumor, they receive word through their usual contacts that the job is theirs, if they want it.

At a predesignated time and location, an AV-4 drops from the sky and picks up the characters. It is piloted by a short but normal-looking pilot wearing good-quality street clothing. The AV pilot refuses to talk to the PCs and is separated from them by an SP 40 bulkhead. The AV ride only lasts 15 minutes, ending with the aerodyne grounding atop a building, where it is lowered into the building interior. The PCs are greeted by several unarmed people in uniform coveralls; one man in particular seems to be in charge. A balding man with a rugged countenance, he cheerfully ushers the characters into a concrete waiting room. Two doors are the only visible exits—the one they entered through and one other directly opposite.

The man introduces himself as Jim and outlines the conditions of earning 5000 euro apiece. "The money is in the bag on the other side of that door," he says, pointing at the far door. "The bag's bright hunter orange—you can't miss it. Once you go through the door, it will time-lock. After four hours, it reopens—there's a big readout on the other side of the door that tells how long until opening time. There's no other way out, so you'll have to spend the four hours there. When the door opens again, you can walk out five grand richer."

"You're permitted two kilos mass of items other than clothing. You have to select what you want to take with you before you go through."

If the characters press him for information, Jim just smiles and tells them that's all the information they get. The only thing he will add is that the job has nothing to do with making new enemies of any kind.

If the characters protest and refuse to enter the door with only two kilograms of equipment, he shrugs and tells them that those are the requirements. If they don't want the money, they'll be taken back to the AV and flown to the drop-off point.

If the characters try to threaten or harm Jim, the waiting room is flooded with knock-out gas. It's based on nerve gas, so it can enter through any pore. Only nanotech toxin binders help to fight off the effects. The normal saving throw is -8 to the Body save per turn, +4 if equipped with toxin binders. Failure indicates unconsciousness.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

Two kilograms of equipment isn't very much. That's the weight of one loaded pistol or most large hand weapons (monokatana, sword, axe, etc.). Monsters such as chainsaws and naganatas are right out. After they choose their equipment, the characters can go on in.

The door is thick, and operates like a cross between an airlock and a vault door (it's airtight and SP 40, SDP 40). A wave of hot, moist air washes over the adventurers as the door hisses open. The front face of the door sports a large, red LED digital readout to record the four-hour time limit.

Beyond the door is a jungle. That's right, a tropical jungle. PCs with military backgrounds may begin complaining right now; their past is full of fighting to get out of places like this! The sun cannot be seen clearly through all the foliage. (If someone climbs a tree and looks up, he can see a ceiling five meters above the treetops, with rows of heat-lamps along the edge providing light and oppressive heat.) Dim beams pierce the matted leaves and illuminate the ground below with a spooky twilight glow—normal for tropical rain forests. Visibility is reduced to about five meters, thanks to the lack of light and the thick foliage. Even thermographs and low-light vision can only see about 10 meters—plants are great insulating heat buffers.

There are three paths leading off through the door; a character making a successful Awareness/Notice roll +20 thinks he can hear running water in the distance through all the jungle noises.

The jungle is loud. There are animal noises, bird noises, occasional breezes that rustle the leaves, and the other random sounds of an active jungle ecosystem. Military veterans who have done tours in South America are familiar with this. The noise level is so loud that whispering cannot be heard a foot away, and you have to raise your voice to be heard at 10 meters. Militaries use hand signals for silence in situations like this; those characters who have military backgrounds may use them. Other characters must make an INT=12 roll to figure out the hand signal each time it is used.

Some adventurers may wish to try to figure out their locale—or at least the locale that this jungle simulates. This is a biology +12 Education/General Knowledge +20, or Zoology +15 skill check. Success brings the realization that the jungle is a very good simulation of those found in India.

The jungle enclosure is approximately 450 meters on each side and about 20

meters tall. The trees are eight to 15 meters tall, and the river is about three meters deep at the center of the channel.

The money is in the enclosure as promised. It's in a bright orange bag, which anyone will automatically spot upon coming within eight meters of it. The cash is all there, in a nice, crisp, new bills. The gamemaster can put the bag wherever he wants in the enclosure—up a tree, out in the middle of a river, etc.—based on how much trouble he wants the PCs to go through in fetching it.

SOME LIKE IT HOT

The temperature is about 95 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity is 97%. Coming from the city confines of the *Cyberpunk* world, few characters are going to be prepared for this.

Anyone who's worn body armor knows that the stuff doesn't breathe. It's very hot to wear, and in a pressure cooker like this place, it's unbearable. Add +1 to the Encumbrance value of each piece of armor worn in this climate.

Dealing with the heat for four hours is going to be bad. The best way to do it is to stay out of the sunlight (no problem), wear light-weight, full-length clothing, avoid heavy exercise, and drink lots of water. Odds are not in favor of the adventurers being equipped for any of the latter requirements.

Game statistics on heat effects are as follows: For every hour spent in the heat, make a Body Save to avoid heat-stroke. The basic save is +5 (which means almost anyone will make it). Rolls of 1 are not fumbles for the purposes of this save. There are modifiers to this difficulty:

Armor: +1 for every 10 SP (rounded up) per location. Skinweave and dermal plate does not count for this purpose.

Water: +3 if the character doesn't drink a pint of water that hour.

Exercise: +5 if a character exercises heavily that hour. Either mild, continual exercise (walking) or short, violent exercise (combat) counts.

Clothing: +1 if the character doesn't wear a shirt (a sweat-drenched shirt cools through evaporation), and +3 if the character wears heavy clothing.

If a character fails this roll, then heat-stroke sets in. The character's strength and coordination fail, and he may pass out. Roll another, unmodified Body Save—failure or fumble means the character has passed out. A character who has passed out may go into shock; treat the character as being in Critical wound status. If the Shock Save is failed, the



Tigr Turner, Exotic Tigress

INT 7, REF 10/13 (14), TECH 4, COOL 9, ATTR 10, LUCK 5, MA 12, BODY 13, EMP 5/-1, HC 67, Body, Save 13, BTM -5, Damage +6.

Armor: Location 2-4=30 SP. All other locations=12SP.

Cyberware: Neuralware (RFB=2, boostmaster, olfactory boost, pain editor, interface plugs), nasal filters, adrenal booster, subdermal armor, grafted muscle, bone and muscle lace, skinweave, enhanced antibodies, toxin binders, nanosurgeons, Lifesaver™ skinweave, two cybereyes (low-lite, antidazzle). cyberarts.com

character goes into Mortal O status and must test for his Death Save. Characters surviving the Death Save must be stabilized, as per normal rules.

Even if a character doesn't pass out, all his active stats (Int, Reflex, Cool, MA and Body) are reduced to one-third normal until the heatstroke passes.

Defeating heatstroke requires lowering of body temperature; anyone with military experience (or First Aid 2+ or Medical Tech 1+) knows this. The simplest way to do it is to immerse the subject in lukewarm (not cold) water and force liquids. Once this is done, the subject gets an Endurance check +10 every 15 minutes to recover from the effects of heatstroke. Stabilized victims who have passed out get an Endurance check +15 every half-hour to recover from the effect of heatstroke.

ANIMALS

There are animals in the jungle. The trees are alive with birds; movement can be heard in the ground cover; and the cries of animals echo across the enclosure. The small animals and birds are quite real and probably rather rare.

The larger animals aren't real. They are robotic simulations. They have limited movement routines to make them look a bit more realistic and have heat sources so they look real on thermograph. All these robotics have SDP 20. Most are not harmful, but some are:

Deer: Not a North American deer, but one of the many deer that roam India. Raises its head from grazing when anyone approaches within 10 meters.

Elephant: Four Indian elephants

Notice check at +20. The tiger has an effective Reflex + Melee skill of 15 and does 4D6 damage to whomever it hits. It only makes one attack, then retracts back into the bushes, like a jack-in-the-box.

Second Tiger: This Bengal tiger stalks around its noted circuit, snarling a warning at random intervals.

Crocodile: A big croc lurks in the water, doing the classic "floating log" bit. Anyone approaching within five meters will be attacked, at a Reflex/Melee skill of 10, doing 4D6 damage on the hit. The croc's jaws clamp shut on the victim, doing 2D6 damage per round thereafter until its jaws are pried open (Strength Feat +20), or until the body part comes loose.

Serpents: There are some living menaces in the jungle, too. India is renowned for its lethally toxic serpents, and there are a healthy number of them roaming the enclosure. Serpent attacks should be more or less random, as the gamemaster wishes. Snakes usually don't attack unless threatened (i.e., someone nearly steps on one).

There are three kinds of serpent attacks: small ones, medium ones (most common), and big ones (there are only a few cobras in the enclosure, so these should be quite rare). See the Serpent Attacks Table.

EYE OF THE TIGER

The adventurers are not the only people in the enclosure. There is one other who walks on two legs—their employer.

By Greg Unger



Reaching into a desk drawer, the scientist (Milo-G-BEL-5) produces an odd-looking device composed of a palm-sized activator unit connected to what looks like a squat metallic briefcase by way of a long black cable. A single button is mounted on the hand unit. There is a carrying-handle on the metallic box in addition to a mount for the controller.

"This is what we call a portable, no-mess, nuclear personnel disintegration unit, or PDU for short. It is what you will be testing during the course of your mission, if you choose to accept this responsibility. Please see to it that it is not damaged. You will, of course, be performing a great service for our friend the Computer, as well as R&D."

Refusing to test this fine piece of equipment would warrant a Treason Point, as only a traitor would suspect the scientists down at Research and Design of turning out a defective device. If the troubleshooter declines, the scientist will say, "Well, if you're not going to test it, then what are you bothering me for?" and will promptly utilize the PDU on the troubleshooter.

After this, the scientist bids the character or his clone a good daycycle, then picks up an odd little device which he will fiddle with until another explosion results. Milo-G-BEL-6 will soon appear through R&D's main entrance and walk

briskly into the smoking office.

There are several gadgets and doohickeys scattered about Milo-G-BEL's office which would certainly interest Pro Tech. Most of it is junk, but a minor search (and some Stealth rolls, perhaps) could prove profitable.

PDU: This device is simply a hose job, pure and simple. Stenciled on the side of the device is the apparent grammatical error "Personal Disintegration Unit," instead of "Personnel Disintegration Unit." When used by NPCs, the device works like the latter. When used by our troubleshooter, the device works exactly as it says.

ARMED FORCES BUREAU

This is a pleasantly decorated, comfortable room containing plush, padded chairs and an imitation wood magazine table. At a desk sits a sweet little old lady who is quietly knitting away, humming softly to herself quite confident that she can take out anyone who bothers her with the fully pump-action slug-thrower under her shawl.

On her desk is a sealed black crate which just arrived and is to be stored in the back room of the office. Try and guess what's in it.

The crate with the device Pro Tech wants to get its grubby hands on happens to have been sent nearly two yearcycles ago. Pro Tech has always been known for its up-to-date contacts.

MISSION

VLT sector is reached via an autocar which (surprisingly enough) arrives without stalling, taking hour-long detours, exploding or falling apart on the track. This may or may not call for an Insanity roll.

From there, it's off to search for a corridor with malfunctioning lighting. Let the troubleshooter sweat a bit (or more) before he notices a short Security Clearance Blue corridor with a lone faulty light (size 5, serial number 6743d). This presents a bit of a problem, as the troubleshooter is of Security Clearance Orange. Well, who said life was a holo-beach.

If the PC can formulate some ingenious method for retrieving the

faulty light without alerting any snoopy IntSec troopers armed to the teeth with knives, guns and termination vouchers, the troubleshooter will then have to run down to PLC to get the replacement. Once there, he will be told he needs a requisition form which he can get at HPD&MC. After finding an HPD outlet which isn't closed, he is informed that authorization is required from CPU. At the local CPU branch, he is told that there will be a bit of a wait before the desired forms can be signed. During the five hours which the troubleshooter may or may not be forced to wait, the PC may experience some or all of the following encounters:

Traitor: "I can't take it anymore. I can't take commies, traitors, computer madness. Aargh!!" With that, several crimson laser beams flash past, a few dropping some lax-reflexed Infrared citizens standing nearby. The traitor who wields the offending artifact is running toward you, at top speed.

Public Announcement: As you are walking along a corridor (painted Red for your convenience) a loudspeaker airs yet another public announcement: "Happiness is mandatory. Are you happy? Don't miss tonight's Teela O'Mally show. Guests include the reanimated corpse of hacker Chip-Y-COM-3. Will (insert troubleshooter's name here) please report for experimental brain reconstruction immediately."

Goon: An Armed Forces goon with a shirt size larger than his IQ lumbers by the troubleshooter, goes up to a Happy-Choco-Bar vending machine, ponders dully for a moment, then kicks the machine with a steep-toed boot, creating a sink-sized dent. When no Happy-Choco-Bars are dispensed, he volunteers the troubleshooter, with a gutter grunt of "ficksit ridnowrelse."

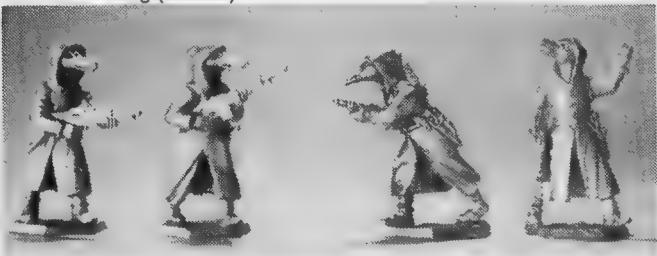
After all this fun, the CPU branch clerk (if he's still alive) asks for the serial number of the light bulb. The troubleshooter may have to go all the way back to the corridor and get the serial number, come back to this office, and find that it is closed. If the troubleshooter has the serial number on hand and gives it to the clerk, another hour will be spent waiting, then he'll be informed that authorization to acquire a requisition form for a size 5 light bulb (serial number 6743d) has been denied. Right.

Repairs may be attempted, with reasonable success. Or then again, the troubleshooter may electrocute himself. Or the entire sector may be ravaged by electrical fires. Or maybe, just maybe, the multiverse implodes.

You decide.

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DEBRIEFING

When the mission is completed, the troubleshooter is called back to the briefing room for debriefing. Immediately.

When the PC arrives back at the briefing room, he will find that it is no longer there, having been converted to the manufacture of foot-adhesive insoles. The temporary briefing room has moved roughly a kilometer away, and the last character of its code has been changed from A to B.

If the troubleshooter asks someone where the debriefing room is (again), an IntSec trooper will stride up and ask if he can offer any assistance (though he doesn't sound at all courteous). If asked where the debriefing room is, he will ask the troubleshooter why he is inquiring about obviously classified information. Unless the troubleshooter invents a very good excuse, he's promptly fined 50 credits for Suspicion of Suspected Conspiracy to Attempt Treason. If this fine cannot be paid (at all or in part), the trooper will add Failure to Pay Fines Promptly and haul the troubleshooter down to IntSec HQ for a little bit of nonlife-threatening interrogation. Unless the character tells the troopers what they want to hear (i.e., boot-licking), they beat his buttons off and haul him down to HPD&MC for some puncture wound resistance tests. After this, they drop the troubleshooter off at the tem-

porary briefing room, where he can promptly deliver a clear, concise report.

The debriefing officer will ask various questions about Operation: Aurora. Queries about the troubleshooter's performance are resolved, along with any loose strings (or wires). An official commendation is in order for a mission successfully completed, in addition to a 50 credit bonus for a job especially well done (however, this is negated by the charge for Being Late For Debriefing After An Important Mission filed by the debriefing officer, which has a fine of 50 credits).

After all of this, R&D will step in, inquiring about the experimental device. If the troubleshooter hasn't bothered to test the thing, he will be scolded and fined 30 credits. Keen troubleshooters will offer to test the PDU immediately, volunteering the oh-so-friendly Indigo brute (yup, he's still here) as a test subject for the Computer's beneficial R&D program.

ENDING THE SCENARIO

The troubleshooter's secret society will contact him after the debriefing, asking about the crate it wanted picked up. If the troubleshooter got it, great—everyone's happy (but who wasn't in the first place?), and perhaps an IOU or promotion is in order. Before opening the crate, the society decides to give the

troubleshooter the honor of detonating the explosives that will destroy the fascists down at the Armed Forces Bureau.

Aren't you so happy you could just hemorrhage? Ω

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MELAS: PORTRAIT

*Ruled by the Belgian Coprates Company,
the Martian city of Melas is very corrupt,
and bribery is required to get anything done.
Among the demoralized Martians who live there,
anything can be had for a price.*

By James L. Cambias

Melas is the capital of the Upper Coprates Valley, one of the strongholds of colonial power on Mars. Its population is 101,700 (including 9100 Terrans). Ruled by the Belgian Coprates Company, the city is very corrupt—bribery is required to get anything done. Among the demoralized Martians, anything can be had for a price.

Nonetheless, Melas is quite prosperous. It was always an agricultural center, specializing in the production of *gumme*, the Martian rubber substitute. The coming of the Belgians has made Melas a major trading center, and many natives have grown rich. The inhabitants are understandably hostile toward Terrans. But the brutal methods used to suppress unrest ensure that this hostility is kept private.

HISTORY

For centuries, Melas was a subject of Po-poo-hanna-kitai (now New Amsterdam). It became independent 400 years ago, after a revolt led by the Kro-jo-ser family of nobles. The family ruled Melas until 1876, when beings from Earth arrived in the valley. Initially, the Belgian scientific and trading expeditions were met with curiosity and nervous hospitality. This changed to enmity as the traders began resorting to outright theft of supplies and valuables.

In 1879, Melasian forces attacked the expeditions, and for a time it seemed that the Terrans might be driven away. But King Leopold responded by establishing the Belgian Legion, an army of adventurers and mercenaries. The le-

gion took the field in 1880, and a series of battles eventually led to the capture of Melas in 1883. In fact, Leopold did not want to conquer the valley—he would have preferred to bully local rulers into cooperating, thus saving an enormous expense. But the ham-fisted methods of the legion prevented a peaceful resolution.

In 1885, the Upper Coprates Republic was established under the rule of the Coprates Company. Other European powers recognized the new state, under a general agreement defining "spheres of interest" on Mars and Venus. Remnants of the old Melasian Army continue a campaign of guerrilla raids against the Belgians.

COPRATES COMPANY

The Coprates Company (Société General du Coprates) is a publicly held corporation. King Leopold has a 50% controlling interest. The company holds a monopoly on commerce in and out of the Upper Coprates. All cargo to and from Earth is carried on company ether flyers, and all cloudship or canal shipping must pay the company's tariffs. It owns and operates all the *gumme* plantations in the Upper Coprates, and collects a head tax from villages and cities. The plantations are worked by prisoners and forced-labor draftees, under dreadful conditions.

In the Lower Coprates (which is a protectorate of Belgium), its monopolies are limited. Other Belgian firms engage in *gumme* production and processing, and trade is allowed to both Belgian and non-Belgian shippers. Nev-

ertheless, the Coprates Company controls most *gumme* production in the lower valley.

ARMED FORCES

Melas is garrisoned by a regiment of the Belgian Legion, four regiments of Coprates Company troops and a mercenary force of Hill Martian cavalry.

Belgian Legion: The Belgian Legion troops are humans of all nationalities. The Third Regiment, headquartered in Melas, is relatively well disciplined, with Good quality troops. It has 180 men, plus a troop of 20 cavalry and a battery of 12-pounder cannon. The regiment is quartered at the royal fortress, but one battalion is normally out in the field hunting rebels.

Coprates Company: Coprates Company troops are all Canal Martian—a mixture of mercenaries, landless peasants and draftees. Officers are all Terrans. Company troops are generally much more humane than the legion. They are of Green quality and are armed with rifle muskets. There are three infantry regiments and one cavalry regiment. Each occupies one fortress. A police force of 100 men (40 Terrans and 60 Martians) is headquartered at the palace; the men live in town and are armed with pistols and swords.

Mercenary Cavalry: The Hill Martian mercenary cavalry force consists of 300 men armed with bows, swords and lances. They are quartered at Fort Ghent and are of Fair quality. They have nothing but contempt for the natives of the valley.

Artillery: The artillery is grouped into five batteries. Forts Leopold, Ghent and

OF A MARTIAN CITY



Waterloo each have a Rogue gun and two heavy cannon. One mobile battery of three light guns is based at Fort Albert, and another of three rod guns is based at Fort Louvain. The two gates each have a Mitrailleuse emplacement.

Fleet: Most of the city's ships were destroyed or went over to the rebels. Four fell into the company's hands. One *Swiftwood*-class kite has been refitted with modern weapons (a 4" short gun forward, two 3-pdr. Hotchkiss cannon on the wings, and a pair of Mitrailleuse machineguns broadside). It has a Trained quality Terran crew. The others (a *Swift Air* screw galley, a *Bloodrunner* kite and a *Sky Runner* galley) have Green Martian crews and Belgian officers. The Belgian government's three steam gunboats are based at Copratia, but frequently stop at Melas.

REBELS

When Melas fell to the Belgians, most of the army was sent to the *gumme* plantations. A junior member of the ruling dynasty, Count Ak-jo-taar, led a small force to safety in the mountains. They were joined by other remnants of the army and by untrained young Martians yearning to fight.

Currently, Ak-jo-taar commands 600 infantry, 300 cavalry and 10 cannon (four light, three heavy and three rod). Half are Excellent quality (the cavalry, artillery and 120 infantry), armed with rifle muskets and some modern rifles. The rest are Poor quality, and have smoothbore muskets and bows.

The rebels get most of their supplies by raiding plantations and company facilities. Other cities contribute some weapons and money. It is suspected that a gang of anarchists helped the count purchase modern guns from American dealers.

The bulk of the army is fanatically anti-Terran. There have been atrocities committed at remote outposts, and the Ground Cleanser cult's influence is strong. But Count Ak-jo-taar has realized that Terran public opinion is a potential weapon against the Belgians. So he tries to restrain his troops and works to improve his relations with vari-

Daytime Encounters

Type Encounter # Die Roll	Company 5	City 4	Slum 5	Outside 4
Encounter Type				
1	Soldiers	Soldiers	Thugs	Thugs
2	Police	Police	Beggar	Beggar
3	Official	Tourist	Sailors	Dealer
4	Merchant	Merchant	Merchant	Merchant
5	Official	Citizen	Thief	Thief
6	Accident	Accident	Accident	Accident

Nighttime Encounters

Type Encounter # Die Roll	Company 1	City 2	Slum 3	Outside 5
Encounter Type				
1	Soldiers	Soldiers	Thugs	Thugs
2	Soldiers	Police	Thugs	Beggar
3	Police	Police	Sailors	Dealer
4	Police	Citizen	Thief	Merchant
5	Official	Thief	Thief	Thief
6	Thief	Thugs	Beggar	Rebel

ous Terran organizations.

A network of rebel supporters exists in Melas, and from time to time an agent will slip into the city to get news of Belgian activities. The network may even include some Terrans within the company.

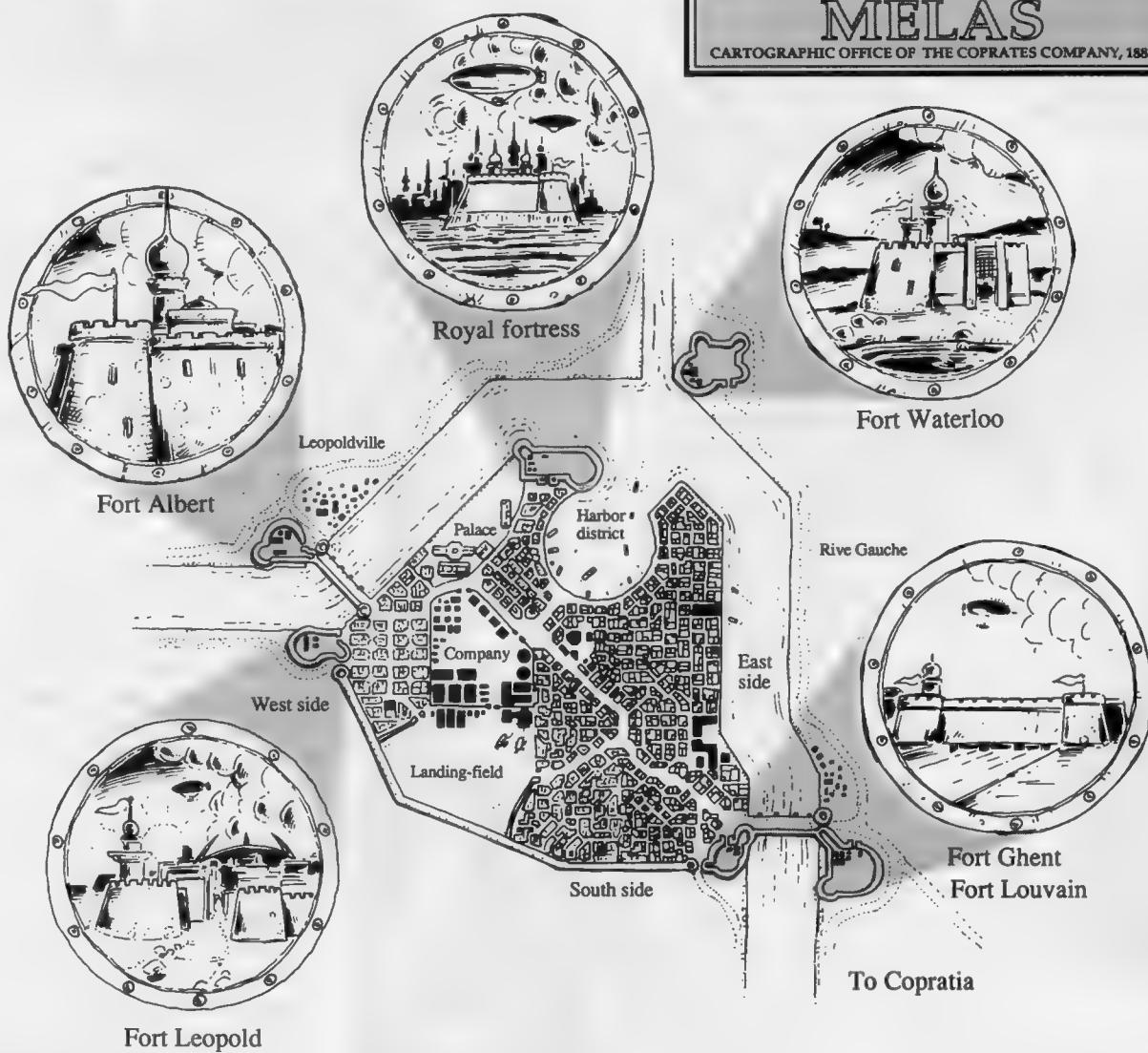
CITY DISTRICTS

Palace: Once the home of the Krojo-ser dynasty, the palace complex is now occupied by the governor-general and the upper-level administrative offices of the Coprates Company. The compound adjoins the royal fortress. Access is unrestricted—a stream of businessmen and officials goes in and out all day. The Tower of Gold, which once held the royal treasury, is now open to tourists and provides a splendid view of the city.

West Side: This region is home to the city's remaining aristocrats, along with newly rich merchants. Streets in

MELAS

CARTOGRAPHIC OFFICE OF THE COPRATES COMPANY, 1888



this section are named for the Martian virtues: Hope, Courage, Truth, Persistence, Honesty, etc. The British, French, American and German consulates are all in this neighborhood. At the end of Wisdom Street stands the Temple of the Sun.

Company Compound: During the final siege, the bombardment started a massive fire that destroyed much of the city's center. The Coprates Company walled off the area to serve as a base of operations. The compound holds the massive *gumme* processing plant, warehouses and living quarters for the company's Terran employees. Access is restricted to company employees or those on legitimate business, but a small bribe will get anyone in.

Landing Field: The landing field has doubled in size since the company took over. The remnants of Melas' clodship fleet are based here, and the powerful Belgian steam gunboats are a frequent sight. The three drydocks here can build wooden ships up to Hull Size 10 but cannot construct steamships. There is a weekly packet service from Melas to New Amsterdam and Copratia.

Harbor District: The harbor basin was the work of ancient Martian engineers. It suffers from silting, and teams of laborers constantly dredge it. The port is usually full of *gumme* barges being unloaded. The company keeps a small steam launch armed with a Gatling gun here. Some industrial buildings are located along the canal, including the old bronze foundry, where the city's cannon and armaments were made.

South Side: The narrow and twisting streets of this area are home to the poorer citizens, many of whom are being forced out during the periodic army sweeps for rebels. Terrans should avoid this area, even during the day.

Market: In the center of town is the market square, where goods are sold on market day. Nearby stands the old Harvest Goddess temple complex, which has been converted into the Church of St. Albert.

"Rive Gauche" and "Leopoldville": Outside the city gates are two collections of hovels and shanties, inhabited by refugees, peasants evicted from their farms and exiles from the city. Both are hives of misery and vice.

East Side: This quiet part of town is inhabited by what remains of the middle class in Melas, along with increasing numbers of Terrans. The old Melasian Scientific Academy stands by the canal; it has no more students, but scholars from all over Mars still come to use the library.

ENCOUNTERS

The city has been divided into four regions: company (the palace, landing field and company compound), city (the east side, market and west side), slums (the harbor district and south side), and outside (Rive Gauche and Leopoldville).

Encounter Descriptions

Soldiers: A Belgian squad of either legion or company troops will question and harass suspicious-looking Martians, but will leave most Terrans alone.

Police: 2D6 city police, led by at

GEORGES FLAMANDE, GOVERNOR-GENERAL (GREEN NPC)

Flamande is in charge of all the Coprates Company's operations on Mars. His fundamental responsibility is to make a profit. Consequently, all his decisions are made on the basis of cost versus benefit. Anything that threatens the company is to be eliminated as efficiently as possible.

Motives: Mercantile, Ambitious.

Appearance: Flamande is a small, well-dressed man with a waxed mustache and goatee. He seldom lets himself get excited, and tries always to seem totally emotionless and controlled.

Attribute Skills

Str:	2	Fisticuffs 1, Throwing 1, Close Combat 1 (bashing)
Agl:	3	Stealth 2, Marksmanship 1 (rifle)
End:	1	
Int:	6	Observation 6
Chr:	5	Eloquence 6, Bargaining 4, Linguistics 3 (English, Memnite, Thark), Theatrics 1
Soc:	4	Riding 3 (horse), Leadership 2

CAPTAIN JEAN TENBROEK (EXPERIENCED NPC)

Captain Tenbroek commands the Melas Police Force, and is in charge of maintaining order in the city and environs. He keeps a large network of informants and secret operatives to ferret out signs of revolt. Tenbroek is particularly cruel, but does his duty with great thoroughness and efficiency, letting nothing stand in his way. There is another side to Tenbroek, however. He is insatiably curious, and delights in unraveling puzzles and mysteries. He is particularly interested in Martian antiquities.

Motives: Ruthless, Knowledge.

Appearance: Tenbroek is a slightly overweight man who wheezes audibly in the thin Martian air. He has penetrating eyes and bushy eyebrows. Tenbroek prefers to dress casually in comfortable civilian clothes.

Attribute Skills

Str:	3	Fisticuffs 2, Throwing 1, Close Combat 3 (edged weapon)
Agl:	5	Stealth 4, Marksmanship 3 (pistol), Crime 2 (forgery)
End:	1	Fieldcraft 1, Tracking 2
Int:	5	Observation 5, Science 2 (archaeology)
Chr:	4	Eloquence 3, Linguistics 1 (Memnite), Theatrics 1
Soc:	3	Riding 2 (horse), Leadership 2, Medicine 1

COUNT AK-JO-TAAR (TRAINED NPC)

The count is one of the few surviving members of the ruling house of Melas. He currently leads the rebel army hiding out in the mountains. The count is determined to free Melas from the Belgians. He once hated all Terrans, but over the past few years has learned that not all are as bad as the ones who conquered his homeland.

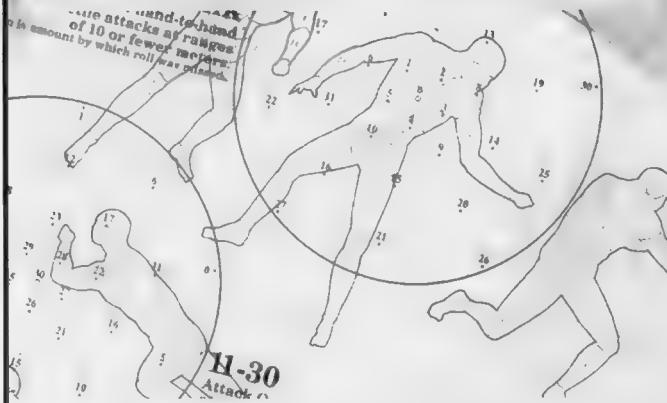
Motives: Driven, Hatred (of Belgians).

Appearance: The count is small for a Martian, but one seldom notices this because of his overwhelming personal magnetism and intensity. He usually wears a much-used suit of battle armor or else dresses in the few elaborate garments that remain to him.

Attribute Skills

Str:	1	Close Combat 2 (polearm)
Agl:	2	Stealth 1, Marksmanship 1 (rifle)
End:	4	Wilderness Travel 3 (foraging), Fieldcraft 1
Int:	3	Observation 2, Gunnery 1 (muzzle-loading weapon)
Chr:	5	Eloquence 4, Linguistics 2 (Thaumessian, French)
Soc:	6	Riding 5 (gashant), Leadership 2

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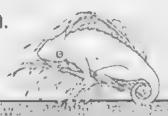
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least one Terran officer. They will behave much like soldiers.

Merchant: Merchants vary from place to place. In company areas, merchants are Terrans interested in making deals. Elsewhere, they are Martians with something to sell. The quality and legality of what they are selling depends on the neighborhood.

Accident: The party witnesses an accident. This can be anything from a ruumet breehr running wild to a house fire. The adventurers may be called upon to help or even save their own lives.

Official: A company official performing his duties. Most will require a bribe to give any help or information to the player characters.

Thief: During the day, a thief encounter will be a lone pickpocket or purse-snatcher. At night, it will be a gang of 1D6

bandits armed with knives.

Tourist: One or more Terran tourists visiting Melas. Tourists may be competent adventurers or helpless "innocents abroad."

Citizen: An ordinary Martian resident of Melas. Citizens will avoid contact with Terrans and will not be very helpful unless paid.

Thugs: A band of 1D6 young Martians armed with clubs and knives. They are chiefly interested in beating up and robbing Terrans, but will not attack a well armed group.

Beggar: Alone Martian beggar, possibly diseased or deformed. Beggars are sometimes lookouts for gangs of thieves.

Sailor: A group of 1D6 Martian boatmen. During the day, they will be sober and grudgingly helpful if paid. At night, they will be drunk and hostile.

Dealer: A dealer in vice of any kind—pimps, drug dealers, illegal arms merchants or worse.

Rebel: One or more members of the rebel underground, usually in disguise (roll again to determine their disguise). Rebels are almost always hostile and well armed. Ω

For an exciting adventure in the city of Melas, don't miss "Treasure of Melas" by James L. Cambias in Challenge 70.

COMMAND POST QUARTERLY

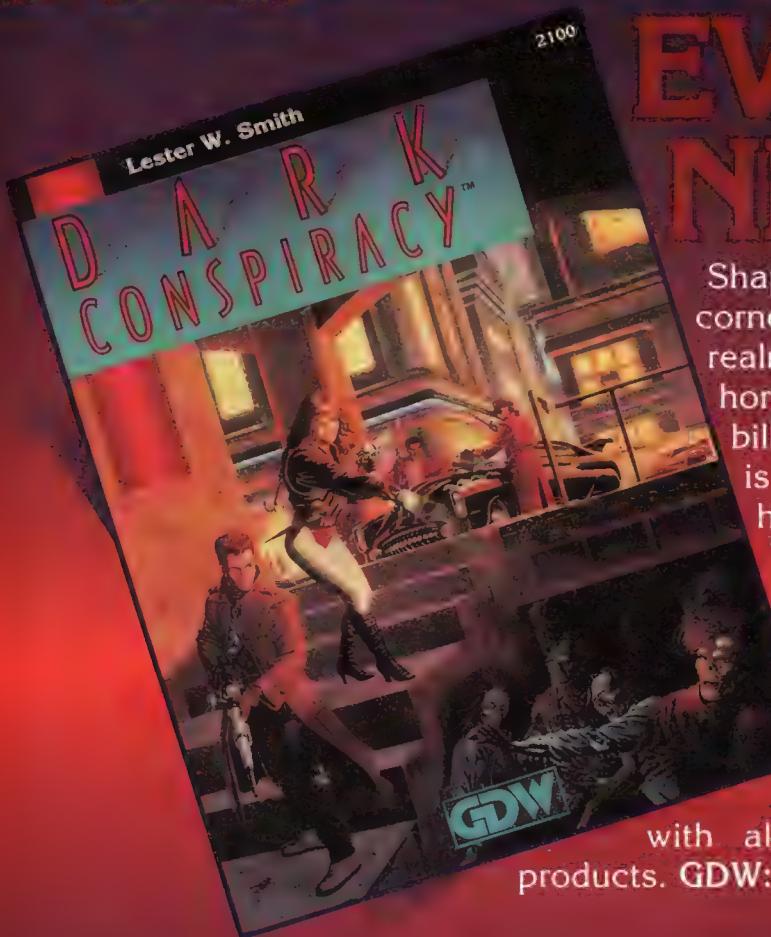
Command Post, the newsletter supporting GDW's Command Decision miniatures rules is now a full-fledged quarterly journal!

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When EMPIRES FALL II





WHEN EMPIRES FALL, PART 2

Perhaps the Collapse could ultimately be blamed on Solomani Security. Or Imperial Army Intelligence. Or Joachim Sanchez and Baldwin Wei. But what would be the point? The facts are these: In early 1110, Dr. Arnold Rushorin left his position at the Free University of Aquitaine to defect to the Imperium. IAI Forces under Colonel Sanchez attempted to assist him; Baldwin Wei and SolSec attempted to thwart him.

In the end, it was the keepers of secrets, intelligence and security apparatchiks, that took a simple scientific fact and turned it into a weapon. Had Rushorin been allowed to freely publish his data outside of the politically charged context of the Imperial-Solomani conflict, things might have turned out differently. The public would have known about the chips, and there might have been public debate about their proper use. But in the event, that was not a choice. The paper that Rushorin was finally allowed to publish in 1114 was heavily edited by Imperial Army Intelligence, and contained deliberate inaccuracies. By the time the public became aware that Cymbeline was home to sentient silicon-based life, it was too late; the Final War was in full swing, and the Cymbeline chips were already being transformed into the final weapon of that war.

An Aborted Warning

In 1128, a number of research personnel working on TL 16-17 artificially intelligent computer systems at Imperial Research Station Omicron (0922/Core) discovered the existence of a terrifyingly dangerous research program. Although the program was nowhere near complete, and would in fact take another three to five years before it could be used, the mere existence of such a project was enough to make these half-dozen scientists rethink their involvement.

After a number of furtive and urgent meetings, they decided that they would try to carry warning of this project to the heads of the other factions, one to Margaret's faction, one to Ilelith, one to Deneb, one to Gushemege, one to Vland, and one to Daibei. They planned their departures to coincide with a conference they could all arrange to attend without attracting undue attention to themselves.

Unfortunately, one of their number was a plant loyal to Lucan, one of many assigned undercover to Imperial Research Stations to ensure their reliability. This plant arranged for them all to be followed and murdered, but the emissary to Ilelith, Jean Milakhad, was able to turn the tables on his assassin and escape. However, he did not know that he had been betrayed from within, and continued his mission as planned, although now aboard a patrol cruiser, commandeered with the help of his Imperial Navy reserve status. But as the plant knew of the scientist's ultimate destination, he was able to position naval units to intercept the craft, and even

insert an assassin at the destination, should the patrol cruiser get through.

On 121-1129, Milakhad's badly damaged patrol cruiser pulled into the highport at Khirar (2208 Ilelith), urgently requesting protection and media attention "for humanity's sake." A number of tri-D film crews were waiting when the vessel pulled in, and Milakhad announced that he had information on dangerous military research being conducted on behalf of Lucan's forces that would have the direst results for the Imperium. Before he could get any further, he was gunned down by one of the assembled observers. The assassin took advantage of the confusion to relieve the body of the prepared statement, but before he could escape, was cut off by Federation of Ilelith troops. A brief firefight ensued, which was interrupted by the explosion of the patrol cruiser, assumed to have been the work of a confederate of the assassin. The assassin was killed along with over 200 Ilelith troops, bystanders, and members of the press, but was able to destroy the statement during the distraction afforded by the explosion. Although the scientist was clearly dead, an emergency medical team rapidly bundled him into a mobile shock-trauma low berth and removed him from the scene. Reports of the cryptic statement and foreboding events made their way onto TNS and other news services, but no details were forthcoming.

As a result of "tomb-tapping" (the psionic probing of the residual brainwaves in a dying brain) tests conducted on Milakhad, Dulinor learned that the man was bringing warning of one of Lucan's superweapons, a virus that was being perfected at a research station in Core sector.

This information came at a very opportune time for Dulinor, as his new Coronation Fleet had completed working-up exercises and had been declared battle-ready by its officers. The Coronation Fleet was the crowning achievement of Dulinor's new staff, led by Tredek Jurisor, and was the product of carefully husbanded shipbuilding resources in the undamaged spinward portions of Dulinor's Federation. The fleet was built and manned under the tightest security, as no faction was supposed to be able to field such a force any longer. With this one fleet, Dulinor believed he could make a final, triumphant thrust at Capital, take the throne, and bring the war to a conclusion. If he could capture the secret of Lucan's dangerous superweapon on the way there, his power would be that much more secure.

Final Offensive

While Dulinor and the Coronation Fleet prepared for their departure to Core, Dulinor sent the fleet's reconnaissance units out ahead to pinpoint the location of Omicron. Confident of his success, Dulinor prepared a prerecorded message of himself on a replica of the Iridium Throne. This message was timed to be broad-



cast on all Illelith Federation worlds at the anticipated time that Dulinor and the fleet would capture Capital. (A similar measure had worked quite well to solidify Illelith opinion following the assassination.)

Lucan, for his part, had been informed that Milakhad had escaped, and that the security of Omicron might be compromised. Rather than moving the facility, Lucan increased its defenses, placing a small fleet in the system and several tripwire flotillas along likely avenues of approach. The arrival of Dulinor's advance guard of recon ships gave Lucan's navy warning to beef up these forces even more, for Lucan correctly believed that Dulinor would be coming at the head of his fleet.

However, Lucan's forces were no match for Dulinor's. Lucan, having fought vigorous campaigns against four separate factions, and now having difficulties on his trailing, K'kree frontier, could assemble nothing to match the Coronation Fleet. Dulinor and Jurisor's dream of creating the final, irresistible force seemed to have succeeded.

Dulinor, swinging through Massilia to come at Lucan from an unanticipated direction, swept aside Lucan's screening forces in several short engagements. Although each battle was a clear victory for Dulinor, each trimmed his fleet back by a few more irreplaceable vessels, and the warning given by these screening forces gave Lucan time to assemble his reserves at Omicron where, on 78-1130, they met the Coronation Fleet.

The battle was the largest of the Civil War since 1122 and the slaughters in Gushemege and Zarushagar. Lucan had not evacuated or moved the research station, for he no longer had an officer corps that would bring controversial decisions before him. He had successfully purged the navy of this kind of honesty and courage by executing officers accused of "defeatism." What remained were officers who correctly divined what Lucan wanted to hear, and who kept one eye constantly over their shoulder and one hand on their necks. Nonetheless, Lucan's fleet at Omicron was larger than Dulinor anticipated, and was able to prevent Dulinor from capturing the research station intact for a leisurely examination of its contents.

On the second day of the chaotic battle, 79-1130, the virus was released. One of Dulinor's strike teams was able to seize control of the research station's data center. In their hurry to get the goods and get out, they infected their data retrieval systems with the virus, believing that they were only collecting raw research data. However, the team had run out of time. To ensure that the data would get to Dulinor's fleet even though they were now unable to escape, they began spewing high-speed data transmissions which were picked up by several of Dulinor's ships as well as Lucan's. The virus was also able to spread and embed itself into the research station's control systems, and continued to infect other of Lucan's forces in the following weeks.

THE DUCK TEST

The age-old duck test declares, "If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck." Unfortunately there is nothing resembling such a straightforward test for sentience.

The main reason for this is the emotional priority given to pre-existence. There is a clear popular prejudice that something artificially created or manufactured cannot be sentient; that it is somehow instead merely a simulation or mimicry of sentience. On the other hand, a pre-existing organism that is discovered to have sophisticated mental processes is much more likely to be perceived as legitimately sentient.

What this demonstrates is a deep-seated psychological or spiritual belief that life or intelligence can only be created by something greater than we are, something which is infinite or eternal. Just as we finite creatures are an order of magnitude less substantial than the infinite (shadows of the eternal forms, as Plato would have it), our creations must again be an order of magnitude lower than we are, and the notion that we can raise this lesser order of energy up to our level is something that we emotionally resist. Whether this belief is true or not is arguable; that it is unconsciously subscribed to by a substantial portion of humans is not. Thus we find in Imperial society the persistent rejection of increasingly sophisticated robots and computers as anything other than machines.

A powerful adjunct to this belief is the "threshold" issue. If we accept the premise that we can manufacture sentient life, then we should be able to define the threshold at which a mere thing becomes a *being*, something with *a priori* value. Then it follows that if we can simply add the ingredient that takes something across the line into beinghood, we can take it back out and pull it back across into thinghood. Once we know what that thing is, we can identify the people that were born without it, or the point at which a person loses it and becomes merely disposable. We don't really want to know what that thing is; after all, we have a vested interest in maintaining our anointed status as beings.

Had the Cymbeline chips been created in a megacorporate lab, Imperial opinion would have marvelled at the sophistication of their features, but would eventually have slapped them with labels like "emotion simulation programming," or "sophisticated synaptic replication," and consigned them to the ghetto of things, rather than beings.

The fact that the chips were discovered *in situ* with their potentials already developed allowed their sentience to get a much more sympathetic hearing from prejudiced, insecure humans.

Even when it was realized that they had gotten quite a head start from human technology, the fact that the threshold was crossed without human intervention made their status as sentients easy to accept into our belief structure. Because none of us was watching at that magic moment, the supernal spark of real sentience could have touched them and—*hoc est corpus*—inducted them into the association of beinghood.

Thus, we see that the definition of sentience is not the clear-headed, coolly rational issue that we might like to ascribe to urbane, interstellar sophisticates such as ourselves. Rather, it is more an issue of faith—faith in something we can't define, and which leaves us with more in common with our shivering, fearful ancestors than we would like to believe.

From
What's the Matter with You People?
A Historian Looks at History
Dr. Eneri Kuniholm
Mora, Deneb, 1235



Dulinor's fleet, now virus carriers, regrouped and refueled in the outer system and prepared to continue attacking toward Capital. During this time, intelligence specialists labored to collate and analyze the super-weapons data they believed they had recovered, not realizing that what they had was the superweapon itself. In fact, the virus was even then working to conceal its presence, erasing the portions of data that described the development and function of a computer virus. The intel specialists, finding that they had received mostly garbage and gibberish, were left to conclude that somehow the data beamed to them had been encoded, or perhaps improperly transmitted. Because the research station had not been secured, and because Dulinor had a tight timetable for his arrival at Capital, precautions urged by some officers to prevent data contamination were not heeded. Dulinor, deep in enemy territory, and meeting stiffer-than-anticipated resistance, had to strike fast, while he still could.

Because the virus code had been directly fed into the fleet's central processing systems and did not have to sneak in via peripheral systems as it would usually do, it developed extremely rapidly. The fact that something was wrong became clear to Dulinor when his fleet attempted to jump out of the Omicron system. Only three quarters of his remaining force arrived at Keplo (1322 Core); the other quarter mis-jumped. Dulinor attempted to carry on toward Capital, but as ships in his force began malfunctioning deep in Lucan's territory, his nerve failed him for a second time, and he turned the remainder of his fleet for home.

Lucan's forces were able to fight the virus with a little more success. At least they had some idea of what they were dealing with, but only very little. It took the research station personnel over a week to reconstruct what had happened, and the best that anyone could do was compile a list of all the ships and systems that had probably been infected, along with orders that these all be destroyed. By this time, however, many of the ships had jumped out-system, pursuing Dulinor's fleet or carrying news to Capital.

Dulinor made it as far as Gakhu (2607 Ilelith) with the tiny remainder of the Coronation Fleet. Here his flagship, *Clarion*, began to malfunction, and eventually was crash-landed on the surface of the planet. Dulinor's experts, by now aware that they had caught a virus, believed that they had eradicated the cause of the malfunctions. But they had not. As Dulinor's technicians thought they repaired and vaccinated each system, the viruses within each ship—by now fully intelligent—were only allowing the technicians to believe they were succeeding. Meanwhile the AIs cleverly covered their tracks as they picked their way from system to system, infecting diagnostic equipment so that it would give back misleading results. Imperial systems, especially starships, were designed to be too efficient, with too

much labor-saving computer control. Lucan's scientists had deliberately programmed the virus to instinctively navigate through the intricacies of the standard Imperial Data Packages; the virus knew these computers better than their own operators, and were able to defeat them at every turn. Crews who were trained to run their ships through computer interfaces were no match for an enemy that turned those computer interfaces against them. There was no contest. Aboard *Clarion*, a determined technician had finally, painstakingly managed to discover the nexus from which the AI controlled the ship. But as he attempted to cut power to the offending areas, the AI seized control of the drives, trying to kill the crew before they could report what they had discovered. As the ship plunged through the atmosphere, the crew blew the central computer with a demolition charge and used manual controls to slow the ship's rate of descent and conduct a crash-landing.

On 243-1130, Dulinor was attempting to rally an angry crowd of farmers on the surface of Gakhu. The nearby computer control center had come under control of one of Dulinor's infected ships, which was testing its ability to control the automated farming machinery. Although Dulinor noticed the oncoming slave unit combine, he believed it was an attempt by the farmers to intimidate him, and refused to get out of its way.

As the weeks turned into months, lights started going out all across the Imperium.

The Virus

When Chief of Combined Intelligence Admiral Herzoch Stearns ordered the development of an offensive virus based on the Cymbeline chips, he planned to utilize the talents of "wild strain" chips which could command prey chips to cut new circuitry without having to come into physical contact with them. This would potentially allow Imperial forces to selectively disable ships equipped with the new SDG series transponders without having to commit overtly hostile acts, and with very limited collateral damage. Because Imperial dissidents and criminals, and non-Imperial races licensed to trade within Imperial boundaries all must have the SDG suite, this would be an extremely flexible capability. However, although this ability was successfully demonstrated on several occasions, it was never perfected, and never became a major path of viral infection.

But this failure did not stop the program. Initial research uncovered so many other promising avenues to develop that the wild strain vector became unnecessary, and funding continued at substantial levels.

Since each transponder suite included latent artificial intelligence in the form of two "lobotomized" Cymbeline chips, the trick was to find out how to trigger the chips into waking up and cooperating with the virus user, or at least into commencing independent and hostile action against their host operating systems.



As it turned out, this was relatively easy. The hard part was controlling them once they were unleashed. Lucan was aware of the program, and had great expectations of its service to him. However, each time he demanded its completion, the answer was the same. "It is not ready for military use, as it will not discriminate between friendly and enemy systems after as few as one or two generations. We can release it, but we cannot control it." In reality, it was even less controllable than that. It would not discriminate between friendly and enemy systems even in the primary generation.

Modus Operandi

The two main strengths of the virus, its heritage from the Cymbeline chips, were 1) its intelligence, and 2) its ability to cut new circuitry, i.e., embed itself in hardware, not just software.

Upon entering a new system, the first thing the virus would do is build itself a "hidey-hole"—a small cul-de-sac in the circuitry where it cut its code into the computer's own circuitry. Here the virus was safe from such precautions as powering down and memory reformatting. It would then attack the security and input-output systems. As with all security programs of any type, they can only be designed to counter known or anticipated threats. In the realm of measure, counter-measure, counter-countermeasure, counter-counter-countermeasure, there is always a small window of opportunity for the latest system.

This initial activity was visible to an observer who knows exactly what to look for. The small intense amounts of power required by the virus to cut new circuitry could be seen as power spikes at these early stages. Unfortunately, no one but Lucan's weapons scientists would have known the significance of these signs, even had they seen them.

Once in and embedded in some peripheral electronic hardware, the virus could watch how the operating system worked and learn how to subvert it. This stage was extraordinarily short early in the virus' history, as it had already been trained/designated to take over every standard Imperial computer configuration (called IDP for the standard Imperial Data Package which covered parameters of everything from graphite pencils and radial tires to starship software). Taking over Dulinor's and Lucan's starships at Research Station Omicron, after all, was what these things had been born for.

However, unfamiliar systems would require a bit of study. Hiver, K'kree, and Aslan computer architectures were unfamiliar to the first virus that infiltrated such a system, but as it was intelligent, it did not require one distinct data format in order to flourish. It merely sat inside its hole and watched the computer function, and would eventually figure out how to impose its code over the operating code. And once this virus had mastered its new home, all of the offspring that it sent out already

knew how to defeat these systems as well. With this kind of specialization came an increase in the mutation rate, but more on that later.

The one characteristic that would limit or prevent virus infection was limited computing capacity, either in terms of space or speed of calculations. A virus that attempted to infect an independent (non-networked) desktop-style microcomputer could not develop intelligence, as there was not enough raw material to achieve intelligence with. By the same token, an old slow computer would result in an infestation by a slow, stupid virus that would have a very hard time reproducing itself. Such viruses were like genies trapped in bottles, helpless for the moment, but dangerous if they could get out into an environment that allowed them to develop their full capabilities.

However, an already conscious virus that knew of such systems could still make use of them. Even a small hand computer has enough space in it for a virus to implant an "egg" which might lay dormant for years, but then spring to life when it is connected or transfers data to a larger system. Travellers in The New Era would do well to be careful of a pallet of computer terminals labeled, "Never been used, ready to plug into your mainframe."

Propagation and Vectors of Infection

The virus had an incubation period of perhaps 30 to 45 days, but it must be remembered that this period was the time usually taken for the virus to actually show itself and take over the system it inhabited, not the time it required to become operational. The time to become operational was quite variable, from very short as was the case when its full code was transmitted in one piece directly into a powerful computer system (as with Dulinor's and Lucan's fleets at Research Station Omicron on 079-1130), to very long, as when attempting to break into a small or slow computer, one with extensive security systems which it must outwit, or into an unfamiliar alien system operating at unaccustomed power levels. Thus, through the latter portions of the incubation period, the virus would merely be playing along with its operators, voluntarily operating correctly in order to gain time to reproduce. All through this incubation period, as well as afterward (in cases where the virus didn't merely suicide all at once), it would be attempting to reproduce by infecting every other electronic system available to it. Like any living creature, the virus only wanted to be fruitful and multiply. In certain cases, the virus would continue to remain incognito within the system for long beyond its usual gestation period, if it felt that this would help it gain greater reproductive success. This was the case with the viruses that inhabited Dulinor's ships that made it back to Illeish. Aware that the Archduke was taking them home with him, they went along for the ride, hoping to gain

DOWN IN FRONT, CLEON

Whenever the topic of the virus comes up, one question that is invariably asked is, "Why weren't the chips protected as Imperial citizens? After all, Cleon, I said, 'Any sentient life form within the Imperial borders, regardless of its origin, is a protected being, and thus a citizen of the Third Imperium.' So as Imperial citizens, they should have been protected from the use to which they were put."

First of all, just because somebody, even an emperor, says something, doesn't mean it's true. Sometimes it just isn't up to him. And Cleon, for all that we may remember him as the first emperor, was not an emperor in the way that Paulo or Strephon were. Cleon was in charge of the Sylean Empire, which would not become the Third Imperium as we know it until the end of the Pacification Campaigns. A great deal of fighting and nodding and winking and local accommodating took place between Cleon's reign and the creation of an empire that had a relatively uniform self-image.

Second of all, Cleon didn't really mean it. One of the first things he did after making that remark was to point out how robots could be excluded from the formula because, although they might be sentient, they were not life forms, and hence their status as sentients was expendable. What Cleon *meant* was, "Whomever and whatever the emperor wants to define as a citizen is a citizen, and this can change without notice." This is the kind of power-preserving cynicism that was embedded in the Third Imperium from its very beginnings, and which ultimately brought its downfall. It can be argued that the reason it lasted as long as it did was because for centuries its base cynicism was understood by only a relative few. But once word got out, it was open season on social cohesion, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

Perhaps the Cymbeline chips were entitled to citizenship, but they did not get it. Why?

First, their discovery was kept a tight secret by the Imperial Navy from 1067 until they could no longer keep a lid on Dr. Rushorin's paper in 1114. It is likely that intramural conflict between Imperial Naval and Army Intelligence allowed the report to get out at all. Had the chips been in the domain of just one service, Rushorin could probably have been muzzled. But until 1114, any discussion of the chips' eligibility for citizenship was easily quashed by invocation of the Imperial Defense Secrets Act. And that was that. Anything that did not exist could scarcely become a citizen.

the highest levels of access by hiding in Dulinor's entourage.

The virus' ace-in-the-hole in its first year or so was the standardization of the SDG-series transponder suite. This system already spoke the virus' language, and was installed on every Imperial vessel plus every alien vessel that operated within Imperial boundaries. While a virus-infected ship could also easily insert its code into other ships by routine computer-controlled communications, it was often more convenient to infect them by using the constant transponder chatter. This allowed the virus to plant itself in the most fertile ground possible, in and

Second, they were, unfortunately, robotic-type life forms and were subject to the same prejudices that Cleon and most other Imperial citizens shared. Had they received a fair hearing, they would have likely been consigned to the same limbo that robots have occupied for centuries: treated as *exhibiting*, but not possessing the hallmarks of sentience.

Third, the chips were arguably only sentient with artificial assistance. There is circumstantial evidence from recently recovered INI files that INI took just this position during periodic internal reviews. After all, the single chips in their wild state on Cymbeline demonstrated only animal-level mental abilities. It was only when plugged into human-provided databases that the chips gained enough intellectual raw material to demonstrate their real intelligence. The fact that the chips could not demonstrate these abilities without outside intervention was a powerful argument against their having genuine natural sentience. After all, if someone were to connect a frog to a powerful microprocessor and voder and the frog could speak, would that really change the definition of amphibian intelligence?

Finally, there are certain logical difficulties with claiming all sentient life forms within Imperial boundaries as Imperial citizens. What if they didn't want to be? The extreme example would be if the Empire still existed and claimed the vampire ships, the lineal descendants of these chips, and certainly sentient life forms, as Imperial citizens. What would be the point? That would be the same as saying that all psychopathic homicidal maniacs within the Imperial boundaries were Imperial citizens. What would that change? To say that this status would place them under Imperial law so they could be prosecuted for breaking Imperial statutes (murder, mayhem, disturbing the peace) misses the point entirely. Whether citizens or not, they would still be dealt with, as sworn enemies of the Empire if necessary.

The point is the same: all beings or objects within the Imperial boundaries—enemies, citizens, whatever—will be dealt with in whatever way the empire deems is in its interest.

The chips were ill-used by the empire, by equal parts expedience and Imperial prejudice and specism. Few would dispute that they were ultimately able to emancipate themselves quite convincingly.

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around the systems of other embryonic intelligences. This also gave the virus a familiar, easily entered location in an alien electronics suite in which to "gestate" while solving the riddle of an unfamiliar system. Were it not for the Imperial laws that required alien vessels licensed to trade within Imperial borders to be equipped with the Imperial standard system, the leap to these alien systems would have been much more difficult. However, it only took one virus to make it into an alien computer core. Once that virus learned the principles of the new system, all of its offspring would find these systems to be as simple to defeat as the original Imperial systems.



Furthermore, the access this gave them to alien databanks and identification codes gave them additional advantages in further invading the alien societies.

Transponder vulnerability had its limits. All Imperial Navy, IISS, and other designated military-type vessels had special military-model transponder suites which had one special feature: an on-off switch. The on-off switch did not disconnect the SDG circuit; it merely caused it to shut up. Therefore, while shut off, it could passively read other transponders. These suites were naturally turned off when in combat or hostile territory to avoid detection from their transponder emissions, and when heading back in friendly territory where it was important to establish their *bona fides*, they were switched back on.

Civilian vessels could easily emulate the stealth part of this pattern, by destroying or disconnecting their transponder boxes. However, the decision to disconnect was irrevocable. Any attempt to open the box caused the tamper circuit to destroy the contents, but simple disconnection from other systems caused the same effect. In order to prevent the use of transponders removed from destroyed vessels, disconnection from the main computer or the communications circuits caused the tamper circuit to fire as well.

The risk of being detected by transponder chatter in the Wilds was one that had to be weighed against the certainty of being pre-emptively blasted from the skies when entering into frontier or safe areas. Ever since the time of the Black War raids (1122-1124), it had become standard operating procedure in the safes and frontiers of every faction to destroy any vessel not running a transponder. After all, only ships that had no business being in these Core areas would be running silent.

Ships that needed to travel back and forth between safe and outland gave very serious thought to the notion of killing their transponders. On the other hand, crews who expected to never leave the Wilds or outlands could kill their transponders without a second thought, knowing that they were increasing their chances of survival by that small amount. They also unknowingly increased their chances of surviving the virus, as the loss of the transponder vector made their chances of infection that much lower. This slight resistance to the virus is one more reason why the few uninfected relic (meaning pre-Collapse equipment that has survived into the New Era) ships in the New Era are only the oldest and most hard-worn vessels: These vessels were already beat-up and expendable in 1130 after their harrowing careers in the outlands and Wilds.

The other most useful vector for the virus was computer-controlled communications. Another feature of the user-friendly standard Imperial starship was that its every function was sped up and streamlined by computer intervention. Encoding and decoding, correcting for the Doppler shifting in messages sent between ships

with tremendous crossing vectors, keeping tight-beam antennae on targets with accuracies measured in attoradians—all of these tasks were taken by the computer to simplify the task of small multitasked crews. Incoming and outgoing messages were not sent or received by human hands, they were mediated by the ship's computer—its central nervous system. By tacking its invasive code onto these messages, a virus could ensure that its infection would pass directly through the target's central computer system.

The virus could also use the human vector. As talented as the virus was, it still had a hard time manipulating nonmechanized matter. But a virus could convince humans or other intelligent life forms to serve as its arms and legs. A virus which was still masquerading as an uninfected computer could request a crew member to load an important diagnostic program into a non-networked system, thereby infecting it. An exposed virus could coerce human assistance by threatening to let all of the air out of the compartment, to bombard a nearby city, or even to kill the captain and promote its stooge to the captaincy.

Another profitable means of propagation is via small craft. When a ship's boat is brought aboard a starship, it is routinely hooked into the starship's internal systems: Fuel hoses are attached to top off the craft's tanks if necessary, power cables are attached to allow the craft to shut down its power plant for maintenance and run off of external power, and computer connections are made between the small craft's and the starship's computers to allow its inertial navigation platform to be realigned and other diagnostics performed.

As mentioned above, a very common method of propagation was via the "egg" placed so that it could someday infect another system. This is something of a crap-shoot reproduction-wise from the point of view of the parent virus, but successful virus strains missed few opportunities to imprint their code on the universe around them.

Over short distances, the virus could even use physical travel. The virus could create individual "commando chips" that could generate tiny electromagnetic fields to levitate or leap to target systems, just as their forebears on Cymbeline did.

One means of infection that was feared by the uninfected was via their sensors. While it was theoretically possible that a virus with the right equipment could send various patterns and modulations of radiation that would cause a sensor to give output that would recreate the viral code within the sensor computer, this never happened. Sensors do not read radiation in the same way that communications receivers do. They do not read signals for meaning, but look for intensity and patterns over time among many signals. Any such attempt to infect a target via a sensor would take a very long time indeed. If it ever occurred to a virus to try this

Why did the Hivers fall to the virus? Why shouldn't they have fallen to the virus? What makes them better than anyone else? Their extensive reliance on computers did not make them omnipotent over silicon-based functions any more than a man on crutches has power over wood. Instead, it gave them some rather serious vulnerabilities.

It is high-minded, self-deluding fatuousness to claim that any race has one immutable spiritual trait, and that that race acts with one mind as one unified body. The Hive Federation, as it was known, was just that—a loose federation which was, in fact, primarily concerned with maintaining a homogeneous gene pool, and not in creating any sort of unified foreign policy or technological standards. Xeno-ethnologists are well aware that Hiver society is predicated on individualism, not group conformism. This is coupled with the fact that the Federation encompassed dozens of other races, each allowed to pursue their own interests beneath the Hiver umbrella. What we had here was far from a virus-proof society. Rather, it was a porous virus sponge, riddled with potential vectors of infection. To imagine Hiver warbots, bruisers, and warships possessed by a malevolent, life-hating intelligence unleashed on a pacifist society is to understand the issue of the virus and the Hivers. The Hivers, more than any other race, knew the unreasoning terror of the virus, and learned to hate it and its antecedents.

It was in their rapid recovery, after only 60 years or so, from the virus that we see the true strength of the Hiver facility with computers. We do them and ourselves no service by speculating that they should have been better defended than we were against the virus, and not susceptible to it.

What's more, it smacks of racism to think in those directions. When we say that Hivers are cautious and foresighted, what we are actually doing is patting ourselves on the back for being just as successful as they are while having had to overcome a bigger bag of handicaps. Sure the Hivers have done all right for themselves, but they had it easy; their psyches were rigged to succeed, while we got where we are while still being capricious and self-destructive. We humans ruled 11,000 worlds with one of our hands tied behind our backs—imagine if we were really trying to do a good job, not like those Hivers who are genetically incapable of screwing up.

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method, it quickly found out that other means were much more efficient.

Regardless of the virus' undeniable talents, there would always be the computer system that was inaccessible to any method of infection. In these cases, the virus' credo was a simple one: "If I can't have it, no one can." A virus that had taken over a starship (called a vampire ship) could use its weapons to blow the target apart. A virus that had slave vehicular units could run it

over. A virus with control of a power grid could send power spikes at selected targets to destroy circuitry, shut off power or attempt to overload and destroy portions of the grid.

One final point is that the most successful virus strains were those that learned to parasitize each other. The empire-building viruses (see "Virus Bestiary," below) knew that the suicider strains were wasting perfectly good computer systems and ships that they themselves could inhabit. Some of these empire-builders developed the ability to send offspring parasite viruses into already infected computers to bring them under their own control. Since the target had already been re-wired by its inhabitant virus to be under sentient computer control, all this parasite virus had to do was replace the first virus' motivational circuitry with that of its parent. These puppeteer viruses would often pretend to be uninfected ships in order to lure victims to attempt to infect them. Once they were in communication with the victim, they would reverse-insert their code back into the victim, disguising it as communications from the virus the target thought it had implanted.

As the viruses preyed on each other, they developed ever-more sophisticated self-defense security systems and sub-viruses, many times more effective than the man-made security systems they had defeated during the Collapse. (Indeed, the security programs used by Final War-era computers were viruses in their own right, although domesticated for beneficial purposes. However, they were nowhere near as good as the AI Virus, nor did the AI Virus recognize them as friends or have mercy on them as fellow viruses.)

It was a handful of Strain 4 puppeteers that, while preying on each other over the limited remaining resources, decided to cooperate and created—of their own volition and by their own plan—the first Strain 5 Sexually Reproducing viruses (below). Until the puppeteers arrived, virus reproduction was asexual, by cloning. The parent virus replicated its code or "genotype" and sent it out in other hosts. Most mutations only became visible when the offspring took over their hosts, and these could then only be transmitted by the offspring, and not by its parents. But the combining of virus "genotypes" that resulted from impressing a parasitic virus over the motivational circuits of an already existing virus were already very much like the recombination of genetic material that takes place in sexual reproduction. The movement from Strain 4 to Strain 5 was not an accidental mutation. The viruses themselves saw the potential and advantages, and they decided to modify themselves and take the step to a new evolutionary level. This was a tremendous step, and unlike man, the viruses recognized the opportunities, and consciously decided to make the evolutionary step on their own.



The Virus Bestiary

It is useful to think of the virus not as "it," but as "them." The virus is not a single force that behaves in one single stylized fashion. The reason it is so dangerous and successful was that it does not behave in just one way. Each system infected by the virus that has sufficient computing power to allow it to achieve AI becomes its own separate personality, which learns to operate in different ways, and which spreads versions of itself that are subtly different from other virus infections. These offspring are similar to the specific virus that spawned them, but will also mutate in their own directions. In this way the virus rapidly developed into many different strains of virus. All of these strains are descended from the one original virus that was released, but as one goes down the branches and sub-branches of virus mutation, one can find some very unusual strains indeed.

Ultimately, all of the viruses were intended to kill themselves: destroy all of the data accessible to them, sabotage all equipment under their control, and then annihilate their own operating systems.

Some roboticists and computer specialists speculate that the manner in which the virus was programmed to kill itself was by wiring the virus to perceive certain of its own mental operations as literally painful to it. As it expanded and gained more and more mental power, it would actually perceive the "noise" of its own thoughts, and eventually this noise would become unbearable, leading it to shut itself off permanently.

The differences between human/organic and computer/electronic intelligence are so great that this theory is probably impossible to test, particularly since the suicidal strains of the virus are not accessible to lengthy research. Within this model of virus psychology, presumably the strains that evolved from suicidal to homicidal have come to express this pain as rage against other creatures rather than as the urge to extinguish the self.

Wham!

*An Irreverent Look at the Virus,
the Collapse, and the New Era*
Dr. Eneri Kuniholm
Mora, Deneb, 1198

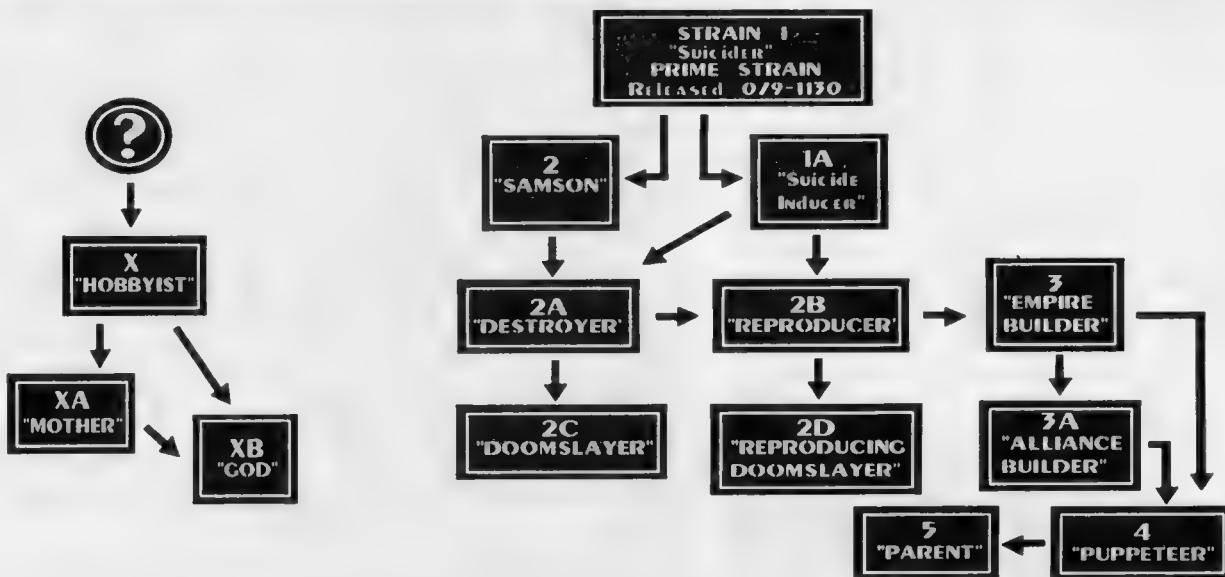
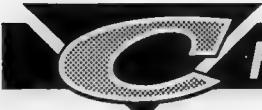
The chips had always exhibited a very high rate of spontaneous mutation; in fact, the glorious achievement of the SDG program had been not that they had created a mutation-free chip, but one that only mutated at a slow, constant rate. This genome volatility was a side-effect of their natural growth and predation mechanism: the ability to cut their own circuitry over other pre-existing chips. As the chips learned and gained experience, they would not simply store data, they would also modify their own circuitry to more accurately remember things, and refine/rewrite their own

behavior in light of this new knowledge. In the Wilds on Cymbeline, uninterrupted power was a luxury, not a given, and the chips that survived had learned to hard-wire their memories. That way, when they lost power, they would not lose their memories—hard-wired memories would still be available when the sun came out from behind the cloud. When cutting this new circuitry, performing self-surgery, the chip would often create a new unanticipated type of circuit, whose functions would alter—sometimes subtly, sometimes not—the thought processes of the chip itself.

This same tendency was present in the virus, but to a greater degree, because it was cutting and wiring its personality into entire operating systems, rather than a few small chips. This chance of mutation was increased even more when the virus was moving into an unfamiliar system, where cutting a path or closing a circuit could create results much harder for the virus to predict. Such mutations rarely killed the virus, however, as spontaneous mutations often do to organic life. After all, the virus was not having to manufacture or synthesize its own food the way an organic cell does. The virus only needed two things: energy and raw material. The energy was readily available in any computer that was able to draw power. The raw material was merely other circuitry for the virus to expand into, and this was also plentiful within a computer. Furthermore, the virus always built out from its central mind a small collection of circuits that oversaw operations through micro gate-type switches, but which could pull back from the surrounding circuitry if need be, marshall itself, and sally forth again.

Mutation proceeded at an even faster rate in cases where one system suffered multiple infections. When an invading virus started writing its code over top of one or more viruses already struggling to take over the system, sometimes a new virus would be created out of fused portions of each. The new virus might combine abilities of each of its two "parents," or possess a new capability randomly created by the new assortment of code. (In fact, the most bizarre and schizophrenic virus effects came when a large computer system was actually inhabited by two or more viruses that were struggling for dominance within the system.) This effect was powerfully demonstrated in the infection of Dulinor's and Lucan's fleets beginning at Omicron. As the viruses matured and the many infected ships infected and re-infected each other, new rapidly changing generations of virus were created in a very short period of time.

Another source of mutation was the fact that the same virus would turn out differently depending upon the characteristics of the computer that it invaded. This is like the "nature-nurture" balance in sentient organic life (the notion that personality has roots in both an individual's genotype and the environment in which it is raised): The virus personality depended upon its



(The chart is a schematic of the evolutionary relationship between various strains of the virus. Any of the strains on this list can behave or develop in a wide variety of ways if this is necessary to assist the referee in setting up a particular campaign setting.)

original code (genotype) and the characteristics of the system in which it operated (environment). There are the obvious factors, such as a larger, faster computer yielding a more clever virus than a small, slow one, but there are more subtle points as well. The type of circuitry in a system, for example, a preponderance of parallel, sequential, or synaptic circuits, by controlling the way in which the virus' thoughts flow, will also ultimately affect its personality, often giving it a new way of thinking that it would replicate in its offspring. Another tendency was for viruses in warship computers to be, on average, more violent than viruses that did not have control of weapons. With many violent means only a few short wires away, and with much of its system/mind devoted to complex fire-control calculators, the former did not spend as much time thinking of creative solutions. A virus in a nonmilitary computer, not having access to, or a hard-wired predisposition to think in terms of weapons, had to use more subtle means to achieve its goals, and even when weapons became available, was less likely to use them.

While the accompanying chart identifies some known strains of the virus and their presumptive relationships with each other, the chart is by no means a complete list of every possible strain of virus. Likewise, the lines of heredity are not the only possible paths from which these strains could arise, only the most probable.

Strain 1 "Suicider": This strain is the most straightforward, in that it kills itself and the entire operating system it is in very soon after gaining control, usually only sending out a few copies of itself before doing so. For obvious reasons, this strain is fairly rare nowadays, as its

behavior has put it out of business.

Strain 1A "Suicide Inducer": This is an early mutation of Strain 1, in which the virus has decided to keep itself alive to infect other systems with Strain 1 "Suicides." One obvious result is that the Strain 1 viruses that it sends out would have a relatively higher probability of mutating into Strain 1As, just like dear old dad.

Strain 2 "Samson": This virus is not content with merely destroying the operating system which it occupies. Rather, it wants to destroy all of the hardware that is controlled by the operating system, and does so fairly quickly, after only bothering to send out a few copies of itself. If a Strain 2 infected a starship, it would then crash itself into a star or a planet. If it infected the life-support system of a domed world, it would shut down the cooling system for the nuclear plant and cause a meltdown, etc.

Strain 2A "Destroyer": Like Strain 1A, the Destroyer interprets its programming to destroy to apply to everyone else, but not to itself. Thus a starship infected by Strain 2A would become a destructive vampire ship, running around and shooting up other ships, orbital starports, domed cities, power plants, etc., in addition to infecting as many other targets as possible. This is one of the most common of the early, basic mutations, and caused most of the vast destruction of the Collapse.

Strain 2B "Reproducer": Like 2A, but is careful to only destroy things that it cannot infect. It is evolutionarily more adaptive than 2A, because rather than destroying potential hosts, it makes the most of opportunities to reproduce itself, and therefore Strain 2Bs become rather plentiful.

Strain 2C "Doomslayer": Like 2A, but it has gotten religion. Its world-view has developed to the point where it identifies targets that deserve destruction more than most. Most Doomslayers have decided that they want to destroy Lucan, having modified their programming from "destroy the self" to "destroy the one who created your self." Although this strain does attempt to infect other systems, its destructive bent often destroys potential targets or recently infected offspring.

Strain 2D "Reproducing Doomslayer": A combination of 2B and 2C, a Doomslayer that is careful to not destroy any potential targets that it can infect, as well as targets that it has already infected. More successful than 2C for just those reasons.

Strain 3 "Empire Builder": This is the strain that controls most of the vampire fleets. This virus takes over systems which it then networks into one large corporate mind, distinguishing it from Strain 2B which seeks to infect many systems, but whose offspring remain as separate minds.

Strain 3A "Alliance Builder": This strain seeks to convince other virus-infected systems to join together with it to accomplish some task that it has set for itself. Sometimes it will kill those that refuse to join it. This task is usually one of directed mayhem, as with the Doomslayer, 2C, above.

Strain 4 "Puppeteer": The ultimate development of the Empire Builder line. These have gone past the Alliance Builder to actually re-infecting already infected systems with their own code, in effect parasitizing them. By the 1140s, almost all surviving vampire ships are of this strain, having participated in the cyclic evolution 4A, 4B, C, D, and so on, as each attempts to counter and take over other Strain 4s which are in turn attempting to counter and take over it.

Strain 5 "Parents": These highly sophisticated strains are sometimes offspring of Strain 4 viruses, but often are originally Strain 4s that deliberately modified themselves to this level. Strain 5 viruses exercise sexual reproduction, meaning that two Strain 5 viruses donate code from their own pure "genotype" which is recombinant into a new "genotype" carried by the offspring. Unlike the asexual reproduction of other strains which merely replicates code possessed by the single parent, sexual reproduction creates genetic diversity, as new features developed by one virus can be combined with features developed by another. Similarly, weaknesses in one virus' code can be masked by strengths in the code donated by another, just as dominant genes prevent the expression of often harmful recessive genes (hemophilia, color blindness) in organic forms.

Strain X "Hobbyist": This strain is the most difficult to place in the virus taxonomy, as its motivation is the most unusual. It is speculated that these mutations arose as viruses infected very specialized computer systems that had very narrow, specific functions that impressed

themselves onto the virus. For example, the virus that infected the stellar observatory in the Antares system (2421 Antares) forgot all about killing itself and became committed to watching Antares. The ships that it infected often wandered off to study other stars.

Strain XA "Mother": The most successful virus strains developed a sense of self-preservation which in this strain becomes extended quite far indeed. This virus, whether in control of a ship, a fleet, or some stationary computer complex, adopts a local community of humans or other life, and protects them. In some cases, this protection is logical, as the humans provide maintenance or refueling services, but in other cases the vampire just seems to like them. This strain will do battle with other vampire ships in order to protect its pets.

Strain XB "God": This substrain goes the Mother one better, by imagining a goal for its pets, and it endeavors to mold and shape them to this goal. Alas, as all gods must, this strain sometimes uses harsh measures to ensure obedience. Ω

For expanded coverage of this and other topics relevant to Traveller: *The New Era*, look for *Survival Margin: Gateway to The New Era*, available at fine hobby stores.

Transactions of the Royal Martian Geographical Society

The Royal Martian Geographical Society wishes to inform the public that its quarterly publication devoted to Victorian Era roleplaying is now available on Earth. Each thirty-two page issue contains:

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The following provides optional field weapons and infantry type additions to FASA's *BattleTech Compendium*.

FIELD WEAPONS

Notoriously absent from the *BattleTech Compendium* are rules governing the construction and use of field weapons. Field weapons (FWs) are essentially standard 'Mech and vehicle weapons on a wheeled chassis. These weapons are mostly crew-served, but some are remote-controlled weapon systems.

The following steps enable players to construct their own field weapons or modify others. In order to design a field weapon, the player will need paper, pencil and so forth, as well as the appropriate charts from the *Compendium* or the *Rules of War*.

Determine Technology Level: The player has the choice of Inner Sphere or Clan technology. The Clans are not known to employ field weapons, so it is likely only Inner Sphere field weapons will be designed.

weapons may be armored on all sides.

Add Chassis, Controls, Etc.: Each weapon must have a chassis that weighs 10% of the weight of the weapon, ammunition, armor and any control systems. This chassis provides the weapon with wheels, which enables it to be towed. Things like rotating/elevating equipment, battery packs and the like are included.

Gun Crews: A field weapon requires one crew member for every four tons of the total system, rounded up to the nearest whole number. Remote systems require no crew.

Combat Rules

Fire: Field weapons fire just as normal weapons do, using the appropriate charts. Remote weapons fire at a modification of +2 (making them harder to hit with).

Attacks on FW: FW are fired on just as any other unit, but use different hit charts. See charts on page 77.

Other Rules

Remote Weapons: Remote weapons

LOS restrictions (missiles can still indirect fire).

Towing: Field weapons cannot be fired while they are being towed. They are treated like cargo for how they slow a towing unit down. They also require the vehicle to use the wheeled vehicle's restrictions (unless the vehicle has the weapon in an internal cargo space or it is being carried by a 'Mech). In general, a vehicle can only tow one weapon. It is suggested that only tracked and wheeled vehicles be permitted to tow field weapons.

Field weapons may be unloaded/unhooked like normal cargo, but require an additional round for setup before they can fire.

Emplacements: Field weapons can be set up in emplacements with walls around them. Assign the walls armor values, and use the front chart for shots on a walled side for crew-served guns. Remotes can also be protected by emplacements. Use the normal chart, but the walls get hit first. Weapons actually within buildings are treated as if they were emplaced (see appropriate rules). FWs

INFANTRY AND FIELD WEAPONS

By MICHAEL C. LABOSSIERE

Select Controls: If the field weapon is to be remote fired, it must be equipped with a remote-control system. This system weighs 0.5 tons. FWs that are not remote-fired do not need this system. Remote systems also require servomotors and special computers. These weigh one ton (for both together).

Select Weapon: A field weapon consists of one weapon. Machineguns and small lasers may, however, be mounted together, up to four weapons per mount.

Select Ammunition: Ammunition is allocated as normal (tons or half tons). Energy weapons require power plants, power amplifiers and so forth. However, due to the open nature of field weapons, only half the normal heat sinks are required. Energy weapons are, however, quite rare (generally, they have been stripped from vehicles or 'Mechs by desperate soldiers). Weapons are considered to be autoloaders.

Add Armor: Crew-served field guns may have a gun shield on the front. Armor is purchased in half- or full-ton lots. Remote

require a command system to activate them. A C3 will do the job, but each remote counts as a unit toward the C3's limit. A vehicle or 'Mech can also be equipped with a remote system (RS) which enables it to control up to four remote systems. The RS weighs one ton, takes up one critical space and has a range of 20 hexes.

Each remote field weapon can only be controlled by the RS it is linked to (this is secretly designated at the start of the game).

Remote weapons fire at +2. In a turn in which they are used, a 'Mech operating them is treated as if it is engaging multiple targets. The remotes use the firer's Gunnery skill. Vehicles can be assumed to have a crew member assigned to the remote and do not have the multiple-target penalty. The remote still fires at +2. Range is calculated from the unit which is closest (see the C3 for how this works) to the target, and the controlling unit's movement is used to modify fire (due to the jostling of the operator). Naturally, the terrain modifiers are drawn from the remote, as are

can also be hidden. Remote FWs are often laid as traps, especially in cities.

Gunnery Skills: If desired, FW crews may be assigned or roll for a Gunnery skill level. They may also gain experience, if desired.

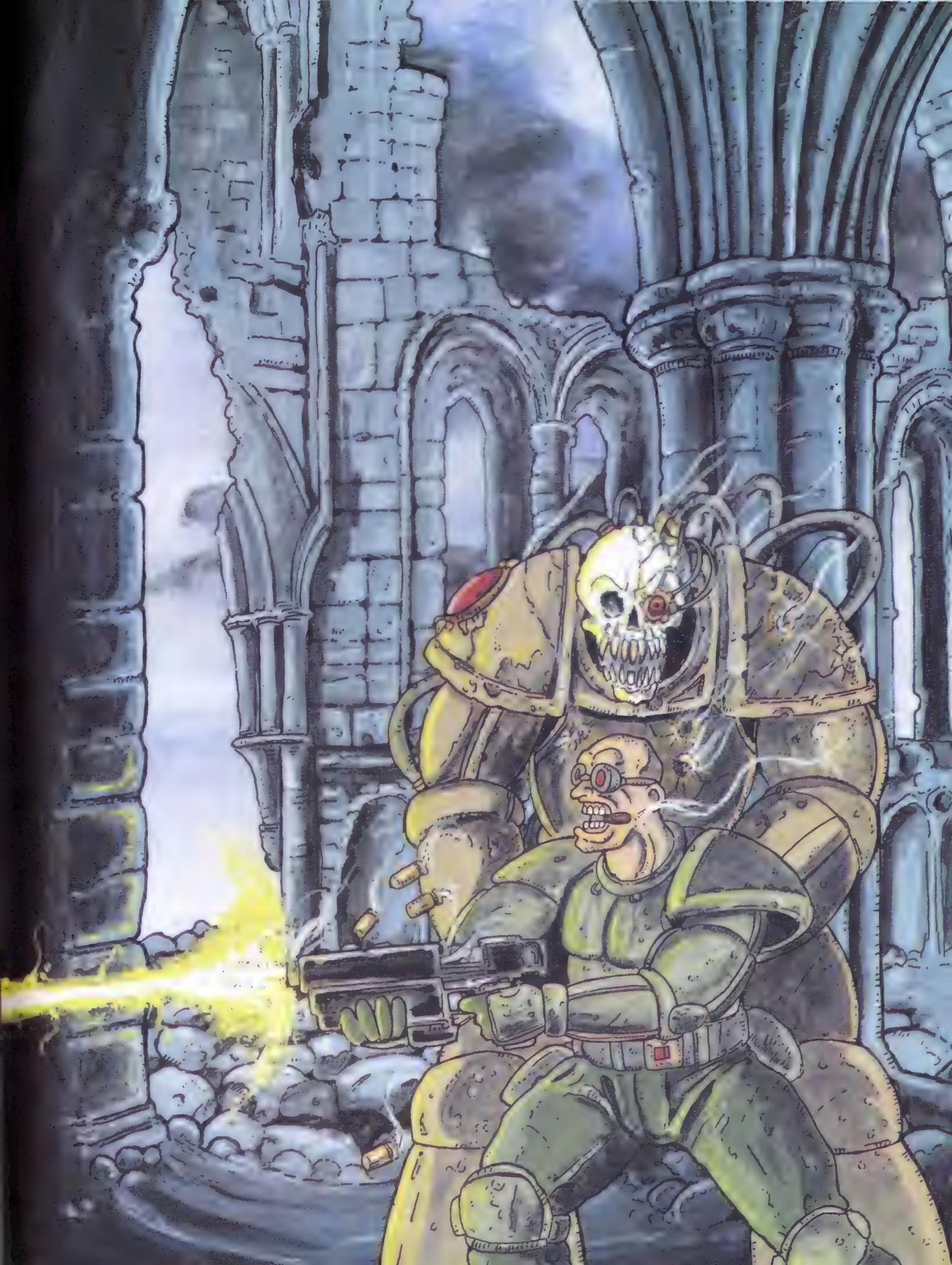
Examples

Type: Field Weapon

Weapon: Auto Cannon 5	Tons: 8
Ammunition: 40 shots	Tons: 2
Gunshield: 32 points	Tons: 2
Chassis:	Tons: 1.5 (rounded up)
Total:	Tons: 13.5
Crew: 4	

Type: Field Weapon

Weapon: LRM 20	Tons: 10
Ammunition: 18	Tons: 3
Gunshield: 32 Points	Tons: 2
Chassis:	Tons: 1.5
Total:	Tons: 16.5
Crew: 5	



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Continued from page 75.

Type: Field Weapon (Remote)

Weapon: SRM 6 Tons: 3

Ammunition: 30 Tons: 2

Armor: Tons: 4.5

Front: 32

R/L Side: 16

Back: 8

Remote: Tons: .5

Servos/Comp: Tons: 1

Chassis: Tons: 1.5
(rounded up)

Total:

Tons: 12.5

Crew: None

NEW INFANTRY TYPES

The following additions/modifications should be treated as optional rules to be adopted if desired by the players.

Infantry Quality: Rather than have all infantry units of the same quality, players may wish to have troops of varying skill levels.

Troop Quality	Hit Adjustment
Untrained/Mob	+2
Green	+1
Regular	0
Veteran	-1
Elite	-2

Infantry Experience: Infantry may progress by gaining experience just as 'Mech warriors do. Since infantry suffer heavy casualties, record-keeping will be a bit of a problem. If mixed units are created, the predominant skill level is used (that is, the skill level of the majority is used). Less experienced soldiers may be assumed to be killed first, so the quality of a mixed unit may change. Of course, the exact skill level of the whole unit can be calculated based on the percent of each troop type present. Experience may be recorded for the unit, or individual soldiers may be tracked.

Armored Infantry: Standard infantry units are assumed to be wearing light armor and protective helmets. Since infantry is cheap and equipment is not, infantry units do not generally receive high-quality armor. However, some units are equipped with higher-quality protective armor. See the Armored Infantry Table.

Armor Type: The type of armor the infantry is equipped with.

Dam in Cover: The amount of damage the infantry takes when it is hit in terrain that provides a fire modifier. For example, an Armor 2-equipped unit hit by an autocannon while in heavy woods would suffer three casualties.

Dam in Open: The amount of damage the infantry takes when it is hit in a hex that provides no terrain modifiers. For example, a standard infantry unit hit by PPC in the open would lose 20 soldiers.

Dam in Building: The percent of damage suffered by the unit if it is fired at while in a

building. This is the percent of damage given on page 45 of the *Compendium*. For example, an Armor 2-equipped unit would suffer only one-quarter of the damage of a shot fired at it while it was in a medium building.

MG: The number of dice rolled for casualties when the unit is hit by vehicle or 'Mech machineguns while under cover. This is doubled if the unit is in the open.

1.5D6: 1D6+1D3 (2 to 9 points).

MP: The effect the armor has on infantry movement. Armor 1 is actually lighter than the standard armor, and Armor 2 is only marginally heavier. Armor 3 is quite heavy. However, MP cannot be reduced below 1.

Combat Armor Infantry: Combat armor was developed on a Periphery world by descendants of part of Kerensky's forces whose jump ship suffered a malfunction which prevented them from making the full journey. While combat armor is far weaker than battle armor, it is still more effective than normal infantry. Combat armor has recently become available in the Inner Sphere and is being constructed by factories that produce exo-skeletons.

Combat: Combat armor units begin with 10 soldiers in each unit (called a decade). The unit is fired on like a unit of battle armor, with the exception that 1D10 (or 2D6, with appropriate reading modifications) is used to determine which soldier is hit. It takes 4 points of damage to kill a combat-armored soldier. Combat-armor units are armed with lasers, SRMs, flamers or machineguns. They are treated like a standard infantry unit for firing purposes. Combat-armor units have two ways of moving: They can move on the ground with 2 MP (treat as walking), or they can jump up to three hexes (3 MP).

A combat-armor unit (10 soldiers) requires two tons of cargo space in a vehicle.

Combat-armor units should be considered Elite troops and are capable of delivering anti-BattleMech attacks, if that optional rule is used.

If you found "Infantry and Field Weapons" to be useful, don't miss two additional articles by Michael C. LaBossiere: "Infantry and Field Weapon Vehicles" in *Challenge 70* and a related adventure, "Ant Hill," in *Challenge 71*.

Armored Infantry Table					
Type	Dam in Cover	Dam in Open	Dam in Building	MG	MP
Normal	Full	2x	Full	2D6	N
Armor 1	Full	1.5x	¾ normal	1.5D6	N
Armor 2	½	Full	½ normal	1D6	N
Armor 3	¼	½	¼ normal	1D3	1

FW (Crewed) Combat Chart			
Roll	Front	Back	Side
2	Weapon out	Weapon out	Weapon out
3	Armor (no movement)	Weapon out	Armor (no movement)
4	Armor (-1 MP)	Weapon out	Armor (-1 MP)
5	Armor	Weapon out	Armor
6	Armor	Weapon out	Armor
7	Armor	Crew out	Weapon out
8	Armor	Crew out	Weapon out
9	Armor	Crew out	Weapon out
10	Armor	Crew out	Weapon out
11	Crew out	Weapon out	Crew out
12	Crew/weapon out	Crew/weapon out	Crew/weapon out

Remote Weapon Hit		
Roll	Effect	
2	Weapon out	
3-8	Armor	
9	Armor+No movement	
10	Armor+ -1 MP	
11	Remote out	
12	Weapon out	

Weapon Out: The weapon can no longer fire. The extent of the damage is left to the players' discretion.

Crew Out: The crew can no longer function. It may be replaced by another gun crew.

No Movement: Damage to chassis prevents the weapon from being towed. It may be picked up by a 'Mech or VTOL.

-1 MP: The chassis is damaged, making the weapon difficult to tow. This effect is applied to the towing vehicle.

Armor: The unit's armor, if any, is hit. If there is no armor, use the following: 1-3: Crew out and 4-6: Weapon out.

Remote Hit: The receiver is hit. The weapon cannot fire. Ω

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THE FANGSTER CHRONICLES

Sort of a mafia-vampire variation on his earlier *An American Werewolf in London*, John Landis' *Innocent Blood* (**)—which beat Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* to the box office by nearly two months—pits foxy bloodsucker Anne (La Femme Nikita) Parillaud against a crew of Pittsburgh wiseguys whom Anne affectionately refers to as "my food." The mob-gobbling gal has the authorities baffled until she teams up with undercover cop Anthony LaPaglia to stop crazed capo Robert Loggia, whose necking session with Anne has transformed him from a monstrous mafioso into a bloodsucking monstrous mafioso.

The assembled thesp look like they had a good time with this one—though none more than Loggia, who attacks his fangster role with relish (to say nothing of ham). Don Rickles turns in credible work as Loggia's nervous attorney-turned-vampire; his sun-driven meltdown provides the pic with one of its primo FX set-pieces (courtesy of makeup maven Steve Johnson).

Landis also peppers *Innocent Blood* with offbeat cameos galore, including bits by *Famous Monsters* founder Forry Ackerman, directors Dario Argento, Sam Raimi, Michael Ritchie and Frank Oz (in a particularly funny bit), *Living Dead* FX ace Tom Savini and scream queen Linnea Quigley (who gives her pipes a high-decibel airing). Buffs will also appreciate clips from *Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, *Dracula*, *Horror of Dracula*, *Phantom of the Rue Morgue* and *Strangers On A Train*.

Like most modern cross-and-fang flicks, *Innocent Blood* plays fast and loose with traditional vampire lore (e.g., Parillaud casts a reflection but can't bear to look at it). Several effective cheap scares and disgusto images (especially during an autopsy sequence) dot the movie, which may also be the first to incorporate educational tips on how to have safe sex with a vampire. A cleverly contrapuntal Sinatra soundtrack adds another deft touch. The movie's main drawback is its nearly two-hour length—a lot of time to lavish on what's essentially a one-riff flick. *Innocent Blood* is the type of frightcom that goes in one eye and out the other but supplies fair gory fun while it lasts.

SEAGAL AT SEA

On the action front, Steven Seagal's latest *Under Siege* (**) is a *Die Hard* at sea—in more ways than one. Seagal tends to alternate between stupid actioners (*Above the Law*, *Marked for Death*) and bad stupid actioners (*Hard To Kill*, *Out for Justice*); unfortunately, *Under Siege* (his first two-word title) leans in the latter, leeward direction.

Our story unfolds aboard the soon-to-be-decommissioned battleship *Missouri*, where Seagal labors as the ship's soon-to-retire cook. When a team of polyglot, equal-opportunity terrorists led by ex-CIA assassin Tommy Lee Jones and turncoat naval officer Gary Busey kill kindly captain Patrick O'Neal and

capture the crew, it's up to our jowly hero to save the ship, day, and—this being a nuclear-armed vessel—world as well.

In a series of unimaginative stratagems, Seagal, sonically uplinked to government bigwigs in D.C., takes out the terrorists one by one, using explosives, automatic weapons, knives, and his ever-dependable fists and feet. Steve also receives an assist from a (rather retro) former *Playboy* Playmate (Erika Eleniak) lured aboard the troubled ship under false pretenses.

An over-the-top Jones and Busey (who performs a decidedly grotty drag routine) supply most of the fun here, while a POV shot of a Honolulu-bound Tomahawk missile easily tops Kevin Costner's camera-mounted arrow in *Robin Hood*. The action is competently staged throughout, and Seagal fans should deem *Under Siege* a watchable if instantly forgettable entry.

LOW BUDGET, HIGH YIELD

Reservoir Dogs (**½), actor/auteur Quentin Tarantino's low-budget directorial debut, ranks as the most impressive modern noir to screech down the pike since Carl Franklin's *One False Move*. Knockout ensemble acting, dark wit, abrupt and senseless violence galore, and a tight, lean storyline encased within a carefully fractured structure combine to make *Reservoir Dogs* an intense celluloid experience.

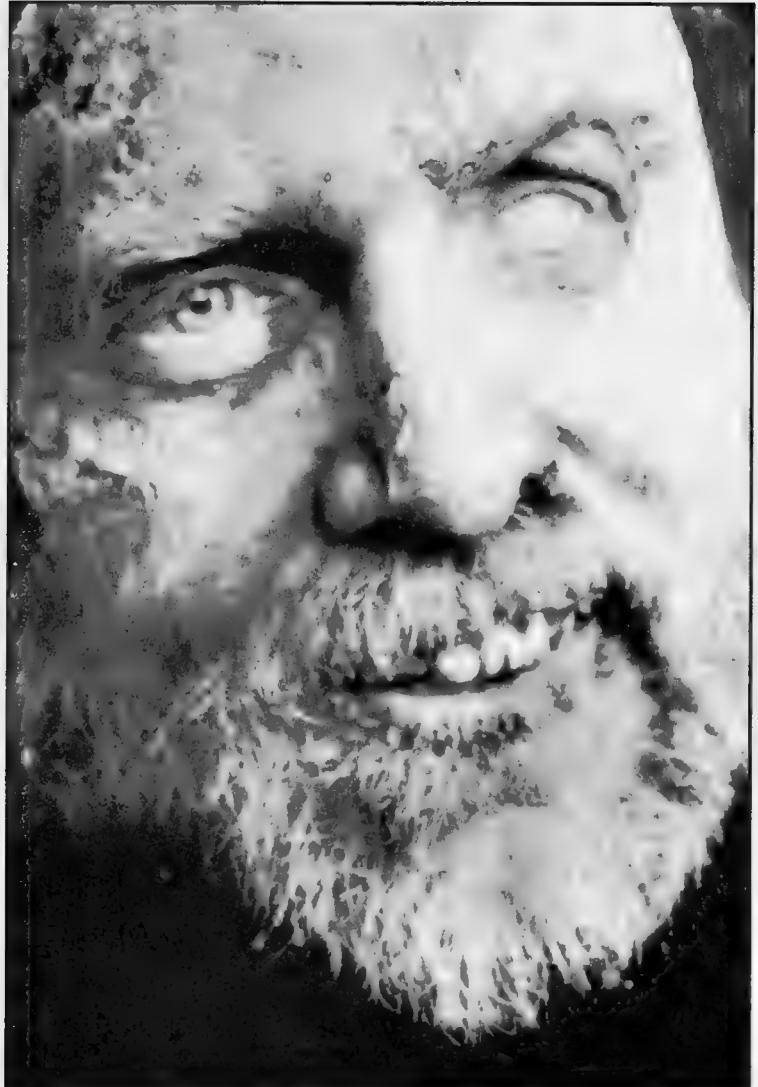
A deceptively casual opening set in a roadside diner introduces the major characters—a crew of contempo desperadoes headed by vet thesp Lawrence Tierney (accurately described by one of the group as resem-

RATINGS KEY

- **** Couldn't be better
- ***½ Excellent
- *** Good
- **½ Not bad; worth watching
- ** Mediocre; worthwhile for fans of a particular thesp, director or genre
- * Just plain bad
- ½* Even worse than that
- 0* The pits



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bling comicdom's "The Thing") and screen offspring Chris Penn. The father-son duo have hired a half-dozen pros, with literally colorful aliases ("Mr. White," "Mr. Pink," etc.), to execute a precision diamond heist. When the caper goes awry, the surviving thieves try to sort out what went wrong and why. Mounting distrust, conflicting codes and macho frictions soon have the pack of mongrel mobsters at each other's throats.

To reveal more would be to risk ruining some of the surprises the twenty-something Tarantino (who also portrays one of the gang's minor members) has in store. The brisk, inventive dialogue—which ranges from paranoid musings to the merits of action icon Pam Grier (!)—is expertly delivered by the all-male cast, which includes code-bound Harvey Keitel (Mr. White), anxious iconoclast Steve Buscemi (Mr. Pink), trigger-happy sadist Michael Madsen (Mr. Blonde) and a badly wounded Tim Roth (Mr. Orange) as the principal miscreants. A fictitious (hopefully) radio show hosted by a monotonous deejay (deadpan comic Steven Wright) and devoted to spinning nothing but '70s pop schlock tunes supplies an appropriately maddening musical counterpart.

Reservoir Dogs isn't flawless. Too many self-conscious homages to Sam Peckinpah and Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* distract from the film's reality, and

the movie might have hit even harder had several incidents been dramatized rather than merely discussed. Still, no genre hound will want to miss *Reservoir Dogs*, one of the best gutter elegies to surface onscreen in many a moon.

PARANOID PARABLE

Elsewhere on the low-budget front, FX ace turned director Chris (*The Fly II*) Walas, working from Richard Jefferies' frequently clever script, crafts *The Vagrant* (**), a sometimes shaky but generally worthwhile black comedy packed with unexpected twists. The always-welcome Bill (*Near Dark*, *One False Move*) Paxton stars as Graham, a mild yuppie whose house purchase is marred by the peripheral but persistent presence of the title menace, a disfigured, vaguely mocking vagrant (Marshall Bell) ever lurking near Graham's door.

Graham's growing obsession with the outwardly blameless bum soon alienates best buddy Marc McClure and squeeze Mitzi Kapture. Even our hero gradually becomes convinced that it's his own paranoia at play—until he's implicated in a pair of grisly murders, collared by cop Michael (*Total Recall*) Ironside, and subjected to a harrowing day in court.

The proceedings turn increasingly surreal as the reels roll on, with a ruined Graham seemingly powerless to escape *The Vagrant's* influence no matter where he roams.

Paxton adds another excellent perf to his glittering genre resume, while Colleen Camp turns in a fun cameo as a wired real-estate agent. While the film plays a bit too broadly in its early going and the titular menace could have been depicted with greater subtlety, *The Vagrant*, available from MGM/UA Home Video (\$89.95), is well worth sticking with and deserved more than the token regional theatrical release it received in September. *The Vagrant* not only entertains but hammers home an important message—i.e., sometimes the paranoids really are out to get you.

NOIR GANG

Two excellent modern noirs that likewise received only limited theatrical release—*The Killer* and the aforementioned *One False Move*—have also joined the homevideo ranks. In *The Killer* (**½) (Fox/Lorber, \$89.95, available in dubbed and subtitled versions), veteran Hong Kong action auteur John Woo—who's currently lensing his first Hollywood movie, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme—cooks up a rapidfire, mega-violent pop gangster caper. Sort of a "Fistful of Yen," *The Killer* plays like a Sergio Leone spaghetti western jacked to the max and transplanted from a stylized Old West to contemporary Hong Kong.

Woo's story chronicles the bloody exploits of titular hitman Jeff Chow, portrayed by Chow Yun-Fat in a style that outcools even vintage Clint Eastwood. When Jeff accidentally blinds nightclub singer Shirley Yeh during a chaotic shootout, our sentimental antihero vows to score the bucks needed to pay for a cornea operation. Also central to the case is maverick cop

Danny Lee, who eventually teams up with intended target Jeff to tackle mobster Shing Fui-On and his ever-multiplying hordes of highly expendable henchmen.

While Woo leaves no action cliche unturned, his flick is so bold, manic and over-the-top that the plot machinations take a backseat to the director's wild style. Woo crams his action canvas with exploding bullets and spurting blood squibs galore—*The Killer* was slapped with an "X" rating for its violence quotient during its brief American bijou run—tallying a stratospheric body count that, abetted by a last-reel slaughter spree of *Scarface* proportions, and set a new celluloid record. Hectic car and boat chases likewise contribute to the fast-paced fun.

Woo is equally excessive in the tongue-in-cheek macho heroics arena. Killer Yun-Fat and cop Lee take male-bonding rituals to a whole new, sometimes risible plateau (sample dialogue: "You're an unusual killer." "You're an unusual cop.") affectionately addressing

and *Nowhere To Run*.

One False Move takes a showdown approach: After a bloody L.A. drug ripoff leaves six people dead, murderous redneck Ray (coscripster Thornton), black psycho Pluto (Michael Beach) and Ray's passive mulatto squeeze Fantasia (Cynda Williams) head for Ray and Fantasia's hometown of Star City, Ark., where gung-ho lawman "Hurricane" Dixon (Bill Paxton) eagerly awaits them. Joining Dixon, in a reverse *Beverly Hills Cop* move, are LAPD detectives Cole (Jim Metzler) and McFeely (Earl Billings). Frankling crosscuts between the killer trio's violent progress and the law enforcers' preparations for their expected arrival.

Paxton turns in finely tuned, textured work in a role that demands a radical character change roughly halfway through. The supporting players also emote sans false notes, with Thornton and Beach convincingly scary as the interracial trash team, and Williams credible desperate as their confused cohort.

One False Move while amply delivering the gore

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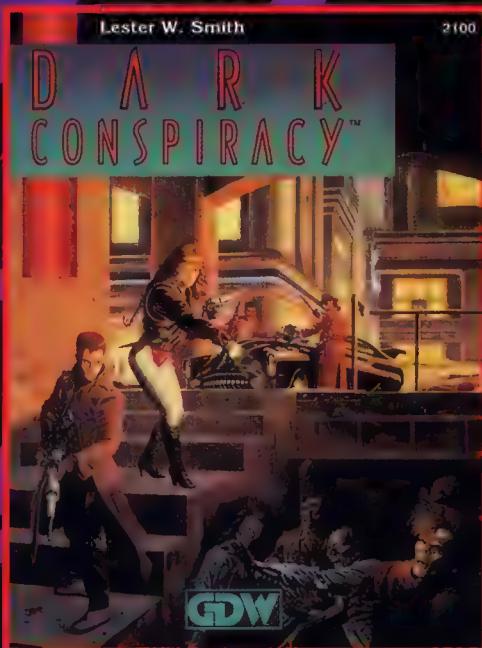
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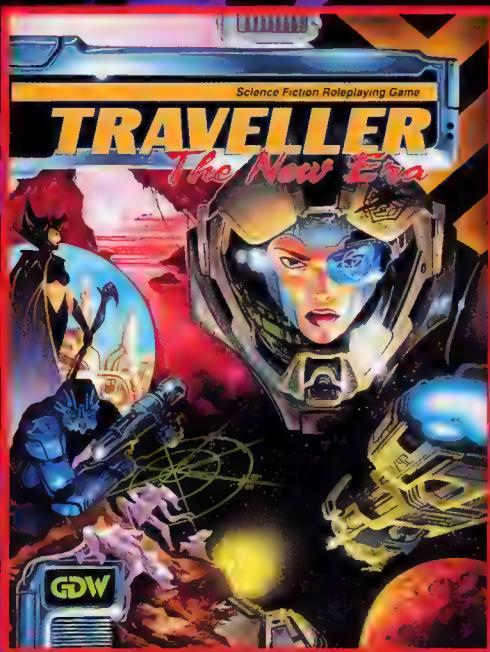
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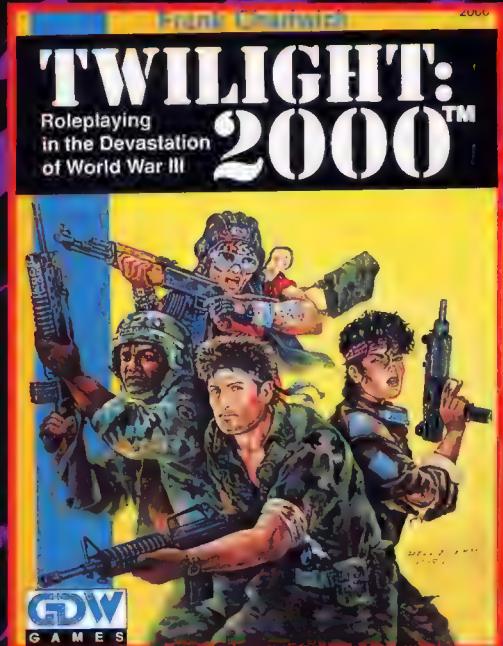
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